

The Leviathan of the Covenant

盟約の リヴァイアサン

丈月城
Takeduki Joe
illust: 仁村有志

VI

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盟血約のリヴァイアサン

VI





ピンナップ特別企画

月刊 白坂羽純

PERFORMED BY HAZUMI SHIRASAKA

お寺デート、しませんか？

Shirasaka Hazumi

白坂羽純 14歳

可愛らしいベビードールなのに
大人びたその姿にドキリとする。

SHE IS PRETTY & BEAUTIFUL.





そこには、天使がいた。

笑う少女の無垢さは、陽光よりも輝かしい。

She is an Angel.

●彼女のことがもっと知りたければ...

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Chapter 1 - Aboard Solomon's Ark

Part 1

The spaceship *Anastasya* was equipped with many astounding capabilities.

First of all, one must introduce the miraculous properties of the QX metal serving as the power source.

Just by exposing molten QX metal to special radiation then letting it come into contact with "copper," the copper would start flying away at super-high speed in a straight line.

This allowed for impressive flight capabilities, sufficient to escape the Earth's surface, break past the atmosphere and fly to the farthest reaches of the universe.

This massive force of propulsion was generated using the unique properties of QX metal—restricting the motion of the constituent copper particles to a fixed vector.

Hal—Haruga Haruomi—was an adventurer and scientist who had traveled throughout the universe.

His spaceship, the *Anastasya*, was fitted with a QX engine. Using the same underlying principle, the QX cannon was able to fire super-high performance nuclear bombs with yields of twenty-thousand kilotons, sinking even the large spaceships of space pirates in a single strike...

"Senpai, this is my first time hearing about a spaceship that uses metal for fuel."

It was inside the *Anastasya*'s control room.

Shirasaka Hazumi was sitting in the co-pilot's seat in front of the navigation sheet.

She was dressed in Kogetsu Academy's uniform. Hal wondered if he should ask her to change into a form-fitting pilot suit to accentuate her bodily curves.

Devising a plan with ulterior motives, Hal was in the pilot's seat. He was also wearing a school uniform.

"In the past, this would've been a very high-tech setting. After all, it's a retro system capable of flying between the stars for a science fiction journey without using stuff like antimatter or degeneracy reactors."

"S-So much difficult jargon."

"Hmm. During a time when it was possible to communicate without using this slightly complicated jargon, like in science fiction or space operas—those space novels serialized in pulp magazines—they frequently used copper as a propellant to fly spaceships into the universe."

Sitting next to his junior/assistant, Hal explained talkatively.

This was clearly a story set in the distant future, yet he was talking about an ancient, more modest age.

"They would purchase copper ore and copper products in bulk from hardware stores in town."

"How long ago was this?"

"From the 1920s to the 40s... America during the era of Lovecraft, the writer of horror fiction that I mentioned before. He would comment on other authors' works of science fiction and once wrote 'the only flaw in this story is its use of other planets as the stage'."

He offered positive comments for the overall story but concluded with that sentence.

"If I had to use modern Japan as analogy, it'd be like a fantasy novelist at M● Bunko J criticizing a peer's romantic comedy 'using a school as the stage is too lowbrow.' His own novels were clearly published in pulp magazines, in particular, the horror magazine *Weird Tales* as well as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories* both of which specialized in publishing science fiction novels."

"I don't quite follow, but it does sound a bit strange."

Incidentally, H. P. Lovecraft also seemed to have changed his mind while writing the Call of Cthulhu, a space horror novel.

He even used extraterrestrial planets such as Kadath to serve as the stage for stories.

"Old Mr. Lovecraft wasn't a bad guy, but he often said one or two things that he shouldn't have. He seemed like a delicate man who was hard to get along with. By the way—"

Hazumi nodded and even began to take notes.

Seeing her so innocent, Hal felt his mood brighten up while he continued to make inconsequential conversation.

"Among readers who enjoy Japanese light novels, there are occasionally people who want to know more about the Cthulhu mythos after seeing references in games or anime. I think it's pretty interesting to read more works from the past and not rely only on searching information from the internet. Lately, there have been books taking old classics to add explanations and comicalize them. Also, author circles have risen up where

experts can come together in their efforts to research Lovecraft, or even someone arguably more important than the experts—like Mr. Derleth—have been able to discover information that one wouldn't learn just from reading catalogs of the Old Ones that are no different from monster picture books."

"O-Okay."

Hazumi moved her pen hastily, writing the knowledge into her notes.

It was a different matter when interacting with his childhood friend or Luna Francois, a bird of the same feather as him, but contrary to what appearances may suggest, Hal actually kept himself under pretty good control when in the presence of Hazumi or Orihime.

However, he accidentally revealed some of his true depths today.

"If you're interested in the Cthulhu mythos, you can dig deeper by reading books written by authors from the same period like R. E. Howard, E. E. Smith, Edmond Hamilton, or works dating earlier such as E. R. Burroughs—Doing research on American science fiction and fantasy novels from that time period can be very fun. Recently in Japan, a bunch of novels popped out inexplicably, revering Burroughs as their 'originator.'"

"Mr. Burroughs, is that right?"

"In simple terms, he's the guy who created Tarzan the king of the jungle. He's the one who wrote the original novels in the Tarzan series."

"I've heard of Tarzan!"

"*A Princess of Mars* is also considered one of his signature works and Disney recently made a movie out of it. The granddaddy of adventure stories set in another world, it's an exemplary masterpiece of 'this is where it all began'...

The story is about Captain John Carter, a wounded Confederacy officer during the American Civil War, who looked out into the sky one night and was somehow sucked away to Mars."

Speaking of which, Hal had casually flipped through a similar novel before.

Champion? Campiote? The title was something along those lines. In a similar manner, this book kept bringing up scholarly knowledge about mythology from all over the world—Or more accurately, drivel of no particular importance.

Since it was a different publisher, doing that once in a while was probably harmless.

While thinking about inexplicable matters on his own, Hal continued, "Look, you've probably seen it before, the kind of plot about a Terran getting summoned to another world. Then Captain Carter, who was already a powerful man on Earth, became even more powerful after arriving on Mars. You can even consider him the strongest hero on Mars. Thus, he embarked on a great adventure across war-torn Mars, driven by his sense of justice to extend a helping hand to people in need. He even rescued an imprisoned princess and fell in love, marrying her. Finally, he became Martian royalty. Leading armies on the battlefield in magnificence, he became the great hero who united Mars."

Summoned to a life of adventure in another world and making it big—

This pattern had always been very popular in juvenile adventure novels.

Recently, there was apparently a revival of this trend in Japan, centered in the internet.

In fact, as the granddaddy of them all, the Mars series practically included all the delicious flavor and essence found in similar stories.

"Stories of Terrans running over to another world probably existed as far back as two thousand years ago. Still, I believe that Burroughs should be seen as the originator based on the criterion of attaining popularity through novels whose only objective was entertainment of the masses. Descendants and distant descendants continue to show up endlessly even now, subconsciously emulating his works or making minor changes. This might actually be a bit similar to the relationship between progenitors and their kin in vampire novels. Nowadays, there are already many people in the publishing industry who have never even heard of the Mars series..."

A strange phenomenon took place when Hal reached this point in his explanations.

The *Anastasya* was a ship with the highest specs in the solar system.

Namely, Hal and Hazumi's spaceship. Reaching almost thirty meters in length, its streamlined teardrop-shaped fuselage shook violently.

Until now, it had been cruising smoothly on an orbit around Venus.

The shaking did not happen just once. After that, the fuselage continued to vibrate mildly!

"D-Did an accident occur?"

"No, we ran out of fuel. This ship is a total glutton..."

This spaceship could be operated by a crew no bigger than the number of people needed to run a personally operated small business.

Yet this tiny craft was the fastest in the universe and equipped with firepower that could only be described as overspec'd.

This was a tradition tacitly accepted ever since the earliest space novels. Custom made inventions created by genius scientists were innumerable. However, there were occasionally stories that would impose weaknesses upon them.

Hal and Hazumi's beloved spacecraft, the *Anastasya*, was one of them.

"Anyway, this ship is a big eater. Using a human analogy, it needs to be served five snacks and four special meals in addition to the three staples of breakfast, lunch and dinner, not to mention a smoothie before breakfast and dinner has to include a serving each of ramen and chazuke. That's why it suddenly ran out of fuel and couldn't continue flying..."

Hence, the *Anastasya* began to crash.

One might consider it fortunate that after losing control, the ship did not end up as scrap metal floating in the endless universe.

The spaceship crashed into the Venus atmosphere nearby.

In this time period, the various solar system planets including Mercury, Venus, Mars and Jupiter had been terraformed by future technology to make them inhabitable by mankind.

However, that did not mean they could be equated to "safe lands."

The Venus situation was such that the majority of the land was covered by jungle or filled with marshes. Dangerous beasts and monsters inhabited these jungles.

The *Anastasya* made an emergency landing at one of these jungles near the equator.

"It finallys stabilized..."

"L-Let's go outside to have a look, Senpai!"

Hal and Hazumi finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Their energy source, the QX engine was completely silent.

Even electricity could not be produced, much less propulsion for a spacecraft to take off. Carrying flashlights, Hal and Hazumi opened the hatch manually and exited the ship.

After that, they walked in the jungle for about three hours.

Using sizes on Earth as a reference, it would not be strange for the giant trees growing in the jungle to have lived as much as centuries.

The sky and the sun were obscured by the foliage of the towering trees growing on Venusian soil. It was currently daytime yet the inside of the jungle was dark.

The air was humid and stuffy.

The Kogetsu Academy uniforms they were wearing soon became soiled by sweat and mud.

While exploring under unpleasant conditions, they sent out flying devices equipped with tiny cameras to get a grasp on the surrounding geography.

They also measured the terrestrial magnetic field to determine their latitude and longitude. This allowed them to confirm on the map that there was a Venusian settlement roughly fifty kilometers ahead.

Then they took a break at a lake flowing with clear water.

The great jungles of Venus were all dark and gloomy environments like this.

However, Hal felt incredibly satisfied amidst all this.

"Mm-hmm. Speaking of Venus, it's the planet of giant jungles after all as well as the headquarters of the solar system library or the Galaxy Patrol."

"Really?"

"Yeah. This is functional beauty as defined by retro science fiction. Also, Mars is basically a planet that's one big wasteland, which feels like there maybe ruins left from the extinction of a super ancient civilization or remnants of canals."

"Fufufufu. That's wonderful, Senpai! Say —"

After smiling like an angel as always, soothing Hal's heart and soul, Hazumi asked, "I'd like to take a bath here. May I?"

"What did you say!?"

Hal jumped in shock and alarm and instantly shook his head.

"No, absolutely not."

"I can't...? I'm all sweaty and we finally found clean water, so I'd like to rinse myself."

Having lost power, the *Anastasya* could not activate its water purification system either.

Hazumi should be allowed to make use of nature's blessings to take a bath as desired. However, Hal still replied mercilessly, "Listen carefully, Shirsaka. Bath scenes offering legal fanservice definitely are the highlights elevating B movies to top-class entertainment, but there's a common pattern. Heroines who go off alone unnecessarily will most likely meet a

fate to please the audience. If you go take a bath on your own, you might get attacked."

"Ehhh!?"

"Just in case, I'll stay on guard next to you. Otherwise, I won't allow you to take a bath."

Hal took out his gun from his hip holster.

But instead of the magic gun he always kept with him, this was a large-caliber blaster, bigger and more in line with retro sci-fi settings.

In an adorable tone of voice, Hazumi said, "...Excuse me, Senpai. Even for you, that is still 'naughty naughty!', you know?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you will see me in the nude, Senpai. Please leave this lake for now, Senpai."

Hal went "hnng!"

Simply hearing Hazumi, the obedient girl younger than him, gently scolding him "naughty naughty!" was enough to fill Hal's body and soul with indescribable contentment. So adorable. Too adorable.

He wanted to take the easy way out, but that would not guarantee his protege's safety.

Hal did not back down.

"Then I'll turn around and look away from the lake and you, Shirasaka."

"....."

"That way, even if enemies attacked, I'd still be able to take care of them quickly. If no one shows up, of course I won't take a single peek at you. What do you think?"

"Fine... I guess that'll have to do."

After some hesitation, Hazumi chuckled and agreed to Hal's suggestion.

"On further thought, it's not like you'll do anything weird, Senpai."

"That goes without saying!"

Hal turned his back to the protege who trusted him completely.

Then he heard the sound of friction between clothing.

Hazumi was currently removing her uniform. Then the splashing of water implied she had entered the lake.

Immediately after that, a sinister beast's roar was heard.

GYUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

"Kyahhhhhh!?"

"Just as I predicted!"

Hazumi screamed loudly. Hal immediately opened his eyes and looked back.

A giant squid, roughly four meters in length, had appeared out of the water, extending one of its tentacles towards Hazumi who was standing in the lake's shallows.

Naturally, Hazumi was unclothed.

Completely naked, she gave off vibes like a lake fairy that were amplified by the location of a jungle on another planet, and a jungle spring at that.

Her limbs were so delicate that it seemed like they would break under the pressure of a hug.

Even so, she was still showing volume in all the right places.

Only fourteen years of age, her body traced out beautiful curves that made the viewer look forward to her growth. Still, Hazumi's body was "maidenly" from head to toe without giving anyone the impression of excessive maturation.

One tentacle had tangled itself around Hazumi's wrist.

(...I think I've seen this giant squid before.)

It was identical to the monster they had encountered at the Izu waters before.

While thinking that, Hal fired four times consecutively from his blaster. One of the shots struck and blew away the tentacle entangling Hazumi's wrist.

All that was left to do was shooting and destroying this mysterious giant organism that had appeared in a freshwater lake even though it was a squid.



My shooting skills are faster than the eye can follow.

As the hero of this action scene, Hal was virtually unstoppable across the entire universe.

"Thank you, Senpai!"

This was followed by what would be a staple scene.

Utterly grateful, Hazumi threw herself into Hal's embrace.

Hal caught his protege's wet body. Her appropriately bulging breasts was pressed against Haruga Haruomi's stomach.

This included those pink parts adorning the front tips of her breasts.

Ack!

Crap, crap, form is no different from emptiness, and emptiness is no different from form...

To suppress thoughts of lust, Hal summoned his sage's mind that was immovable as a rock.

Speaking of which, it was not too long ago when he had grabbed Shirasaka's breast in his right hand to inject magical power directly into her heart.

Just as Hal's vivid memory of that sensation were revived—

He suddenly came to his senses.

The impressions and memories of physical contact, branded upon the palm of his hand—They made his consciousness reconnect with his body's sensations.

Hal instantly became wide awake.

"Where am I...?"

He looked around him.

There was nothing. If anything, it was just a gray space.

The background was gray. The was also gray. Before his eyes was just endless "gray."

There was clearly no floor or ground, yet Hal remained sitting firmly in this gray space. Rather than "sitting," it was more like hovering in the air.

He was holding Shirasaka Hazumi in his arms.

In the final moments of the retro sci-fi farce that seemed like a weird dream, he had been holding Hazumi like this — His current posture was identical to that.

Hazumi's eyes were tightly shut. She was sleeping soundly. However, she murmured in her dream, "Sorry, you warned me beforehand, Senpai..."

She must have experienced the same dream as Hal.

She was still inside that farce, imprisoned by magic in a strange realm of sleep and dreams —

Hal suddenly noticed.

Hazumi was not wearing her school uniform but casual clothes. This was the same set of clothes she was wearing during the battle against dragon king Hannibal at New York during the summer vacation.

"What on earth happened?" Hal muttered to himself.

Part 2

"Let's see..."

Hal took a deep breath and began to organize his memories.

"I remember after the fight with Hannibal, Solomon's legacy, the Rune of the Ring, had appeared together with the seventy-two serpent souls and they were releasing magical power over our heads."

His thoughts grew more and more lucid.

"Next, the Ring said to us in an extremely deep voice..."

Something about accepting King Solomon's invitation.

As one would expect, the reason why the attack struck Hal directly without him being able to defend against the magical power released by the Ring was because an instant before that, his deathmatch against the strongest dragon king had just concluded.

Right now, he was imprisoned inside a mysterious gray space.

A world of gray as far the eye could see.

The scenery remained constant all the way to the far end of the horizon. Nothing resembling an exit was in sight.

"Is this a prison for locking away Shirasaka and me?"

Hal muttered quietly, holding his sleeping junior in his arms.

But he mustered his determination and deliberately laid Hazumi's delicate body on the ground.

Like Hal, who was sitting on gray air, the sleeping Hazumi also floated in the air. She happened to hover at Hal's feet.

Given this incomprehensible situation, the space must have been created by magic no matter how you looked at it.

In other words, I should use this to counter it—Hal summoned his "magic wand" to his right hand.

Rather than a retro sci-fi blaster, it was his usual steel-colored magic gun.

"I wasn't killed in my sleep—" said Hal to the magic gun.

"I guess that's because Solomon-senpai doesn't have enough power to do that?"

"You are probably correct."

Residing inside the magic gun, the former dragon queen, Hinokagutsuchi, replied.

Her tone was slightly sarcastic as usual and sounded quite malicious.

"What a wise idea, ambushing a fierce tiger in its sleep... However, if one were to step on the tiger's tail by accident, they would be torn apart by the awakened tiger's claws in a single swipe."

"In that case, might as well let it sleep—Is that what he's thinking?"

"Precisely. Solomon has a trickier captive. He cannot afford to spend all his power on you."

A trickier captive?

Hal tilted his head then had a flash of insight.

"Hannibal!?"

On further thought, the red dragon king should be exhausted just like the rest of them.

This meant that Hal had to take the strongest dragon's presence into consideration when planning his escape and counterattack...

While Hal was putting his mind to work, Hinokagutsuchi said, "Have you noticed, brat? Your trump card was stolen again."

"Huh?"

Now that she mentioned it, Hal hastily focused his consciousness on his own chest.

The heart beneath was specially crafted. It was the organ created by merging with the heartmetal belonging to Hinokagutsuchi—the dragon queen—in the past.

It was also linked to her dragonoid body...

Indeed. The dragon king-class husk of the Crimson Queen which obeyed Haruga Haruomi's orders.

However, Hal could not sense the queen's presence at all right now.

"Solomon-senpai got me again."

During the battle against Hannibal, Solomon's ghost and the Ring had stolen the Crimson Queen from Hal, taking perfect control of her. The same situation had happened again.

"A practically equal opponent is such a hassle."

It was a back and forth battle with both sides taking advantage of each other's openings.

The thrill and experience was different compared to an intense showdown against a dragon king, far stronger than himself.

However, Hal was not really the type to indulge in the pleasures of battle itself. He grumbled and bit then sighed lightly.

No matter what, he had to escape this place and awaken Hazumi.

"Although fighting a second round isn't really my thing..."

No helping it. Hal touched the magic gun and used Dispel magic.

It was definitely no easy task to overcome the magical power belonging to Solomon, the great ancient sorcerer, but with Haruga Haruomi at a comparable level right now, it should not be impossible —

Certain of this, Hal extracted magical power from his own heart.

In the next instant, the surrounding scenery changed.

Hal's location was no longer the unnatural gray space.

He had moved to a stone hall with gigantic pillars of white stone standing upright all over the place. Described using an experiences from Earth, it looked very similar to marble.

"It reminds me of Islamic mosques..."

The architectural style was unlike any in modern Japan.

The ceiling glowed faintly, serving as illumination.

Hal's official assistant was lying on the stone floor. The girl went "mm..." adorably and slowly opened her eyes.

"Senpai... Where on earth are we...?"

"Probably Solomon-senpai's ark that we awakened — Somewhere inside it. Anyway, we need to start planning our escape."

He nodded at the still drowsy Hazumi.

"It's like a temple..."

Hal said quietly.

Several minutes earlier, after explaining the situation to Hazumi, he had decided to take a quick tour.

This was inside the building made of white stone. There was not a single person nor did he encounter any wild beasts or monsters. It was quite all around.

Precisely because of that, this place felt rather holy.

While the two of them were walking aimlessly along a passage like this—

"Well, this is the mansion belonging to Solomon-senpai the great sorcerer of legend. Calling it a temple wouldn't be wrong."

"Umm, Senpai..."

Walking next to Hal, Hazumi asked, "I remember that King Solomon was the king of Israel... Wasn't he?"

"Yeah. But that Israel refers to the ancient kingdom founded by the ancestors of the Jews, the Kingdom of Israel. Of course, it's different from the Israel in the modern Middle East."

According to the Old Testament of the Bible, the first monarch of this kingdom was King Saul.

The one who succeeded Saul was not his son Jonathan, but Jonathan's best friend and the great hero who had defeated Goliath the giant—David.

Solomon was the son of David.

During King Solomon's reign, the Kingdom of Israel reached an unprecedented height in power.

However, after the great sorcerer king's death, the kingdom fragmented into two pieces, one north and one south, never recovering again —

"But somehow, something doesn't feel right."

After walking for an hour or two, Hal felt doubt rising in his mind.

They had discovered almost ten rooms including small rooms resembling studio apartments as well as great halls where one could hold dance parties.

One would definitely not consider this an exceptionally extravagant arrangement.

Most Japanese people would probably understand if the analogy of "pretty much the same as a community hall you can find anywhere" was used to describe the building's floor area and number of rooms.

However, this was the strange part.

Solomon's ark had been summoned from the other side of the sea of stars.

This ship was definitely huge. Reaching thirty meters in length, it was definitely big enough to serve as a coffin for a giant, but even so —

In terms of interior space, wasn't it a bit too vast?

"Senpai! There's an exit!"

While Hal was feeling puzzled, Hazumi said to him in elation.

She pointed ahead in the passage with her right index finger. There was a wide exit where dazzling light was streaming in from the outdoors. It looked like sunlight...

Hal and Hazumi quickly walked to the bright exit.

They were finally outdoors.

Overhead was a vast blue sky.

Hanging high above, the sun was radiant.

The land underfoot was a small island floating in the air. The island had only one building, the stone temple they had just exited.

A more careful look revealed several—no, hundreds—of similar islands floating in this blue sky.

Every island featured at least one temple of similar appearance.

"What's with this place!?"

"This doesn't look like this ship's interior!"

Hal and Hazumi were shocked, but Hinokagutsuchi said in boredom, "This trick isn't actually that amazing. That guy Solomon simply used magic to expand and contort space. He probably set up some kind of barrier inside the ark."

Residing within the magic gun, the former dragon queen spoke calmly.

So far unable to give up an ordinary person's sensibilities, Hal whispered in a hoarse voice, "So this place is still inside Senpai's ship huh..."

"Amazing..."

Hazumi was dumbfounded in astonishment next to Hal, sweeping her gaze in a circle to look at the endless blue sky before her.

Part 3

[illegible]

It was rare for the obedient and gentle Hazumi to scream like this.

One could hardly blame her. This was because she was currently skydiving without a parachute or a lifeline, holding hands with Hal.

The location was the starting point where Hal and Hazumi had just woken up—A sky island.

Standing on the edge, they took a great leap into the air.

Naturally, the two of them began to free fall, crashing down headfirst. The intense howling of strong wind rushed past their ears.

"Don't worry, we'll land safely!"

Hugging Hazumi, Hal yelled out.

Naturally, he was falling together with his protege, which was why Hal used Feather Fall magic. Thrown off Akuro-Ou mid-flight, Asya had used the same magic in the past.

Immediately, their rate of fall decelerated sharply.

Hal and Hazumi floated downwards lightly like a falling feather.

This speed could not be called free fall anymore. Used to counter gravity, the magic felt like a giant's hand, setting the two of them down gently.

"Senpai! We're flying in the sky!"

Hazumi's screaming instantly turned into words of joy.

The magic developed by the modern magic association, SAURU, could not control a skill as high-level as *flight*.

But it could allow one to take on the sky a bit in this manner.

"If possible, I'd like to try ascending in addition to landing," Hal muttered while concentrating.

This was to correct their falling direction. A number of sky islands were floating in the air within their view.

However, there was no telling which island they would land on if they simply allowed themselves to fall. In such a situation, the two of them would drift left like a dandelion seed as soon as Hal thought "to the left a bit" to himself.

They enjoyed a very buoyant and unusual free fall for about five minutes. Then they landed on a certain sky island.

Like the island at their starting point, this one had a "temple" too.

Its size and appearance resembled a "grand stadium" except built entirely with white marble.

There were ancient ruins of temples in the Mediterranean and Middle East—

This temple was reminiscent of that kind of architecture. Perhaps this was the architectural style of the ancient Kingdom of Israel.

"Anyway, let's search this place too."

"Yes!"

After the first island, Hal and Hazumi stepped into the temple on the second island.

Roughly one hour passed...

Walking out of the temple, Hal looked dissatisfied while Hazumi had a confused expression.

The brilliant sun hanging up high continued to radiate heat and light, illuminating the blue sky where hundreds of islands were drifting in the air. Even so—

The mood was gloomy.

"Let alone food, we can't even find water..."

"I am a bit hungry..."

"Given her poor fuel efficiency, Asya would surely be raising a fuss by now if she were here. But then again, she might be able to find food using her beast-like sense of smell..."

Inside the building that was styled like a solemn temple, there were no usable supplies at all.

If anything counted as something they found—

"Although the search wasn't a waste of time, we still need a way to handle hunger."

From his pocket, Hal took out the result of their search.

It was a piece of pure gold, but only as big as the tip of one's little finger.

Gold, silver, treasure and gemstones could be found all over the temple on this sky island.

Hal had chosen "something that looks very valuable, but the smaller the better" and pocketed it. To avoid it getting in the way during their escape, he did not take very much.

"B-But Senpai, is this really okay? Taking things without permission..."

"I think so. This is inside Solomon-senpai's ark and I'm legitimately inheriting his fortune as the successor."

He replied decisively to the apologetic Hazumi.

Prior to the battle against Hannibal in New York, Hal had carried out the Legacy Inheritance ritual, which resulted in Solomon's ark flying over from space.

In a certain sense, one could say that Hal had already obtained the original owner's consent.

Completely unfazed, he continued, "Of course, a proper archaeologist wouldn't do this, but I—We treasure hunters rely on these things to supplement our incomes, because our work necessitates many expenses."

"You're right... I guess."

Hazumi smiled immediately after a moment's hesitation.

"Perhaps that is how things work. Fufu."

She seemed to realize Hal's reason for saying "we."

Despite some weight on her conscience, the girl who loved adventure stories about the likes of gentleman thieves and grave robbers set in ancient ruins still chose to become an "accomplice."

"But right now, I'd rather find bread and wine than treasure—That's my honest opinion. If only investigative magic was working."

Hal specialized in magic including Sense Magical Power, Heat Sensing, Enemy Detection, etc.

Probably because the interior of the ark was within King Solomon's barrier, Hal could not gather any information even when using those spells.

That was why they had to charge into the temple without knowing anything.

In the end, they did not see any humans, animals, magical creatures or mechanical lifeforms. Even the most necessary food and water could not be found.

At this rate, they were going to faint from malnutrition and lack of calories.

"If you think about it, this place is the coffin and graveyard for the long dead Solomon-senpai. The serpent souls placed along with him are like non-corporeal ghosts. Even if gold, silver and treasure were put in as grave goods, I suppose they wouldn't prepare stuff like food, right...?"

Hal made an ominous deduction.

They were originally hoping to find the exit at least, but that was in vain too.

"The only method left is to catch Solomon-senpai and make him release us through either brute force or negotiation. But that requires locating Senpai first."

"Senpai, wouldn't it be better to fly by using Minadzuki as a mount?"

"That's definitely more efficient than floating down slowly."

Hal began to ponder Hazumi's suggestion.

However, there was a problem with that method too.

'Serpents' were extremely conspicuous due to their strong magical power and great size. Flying in the sky with virtually no obstructions, they would be discovered sooner or later. Even if they used stealth magic like during

the infiltration of the Dragon Palace Court, effectiveness would still be unknown.

That being said, flying would definitely make movement and exploration much easier. Hal nodded in agreement.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Solomon-senpai has discovered that we've lifted the sleeping spell. In that case, let's pick the fastest method to get us out of here. Counting on you, Shirasaka."

"Yes!"

Thus, Hazumi summoned her partner.

The emerald serpentine dragon leviathan, Minadzuki, featured a pair of wings glowing with golden radiance. Despite using up substantial stamina during the Hannibal battle, her physical condition and magical power had recovered during the time when Hazumi had been imprisoned by the dream magic.

Originally over twenty meters in length, Minadzuki was currently much smaller.

She had shrunk down to five meters or so at Hazumi's request.

Even so, she was still a size larger than the majority of large reptiles such as crocodiles.

Hal and Hazumi mounted the miniaturized Minadzuki together near the spot where the pair of wings sprouted.

As a side note, Hazumi was sitting in front as the "pilot" with Hal behind her.

"I'd like to get a grasp on the overall situation inside the ark. Can we fly up first?"

"Very well. Please do that, Minadzuki."

Responding to the witch's request, the serpentine dragon leviathan began to soar.

Speaking of which, Minadzuki apparently used unbelievable magic during the battle earlier—

Hal remembered. Back then, Hannibal was about to deliver a fatal blow to the battered Crimson Queen. However, Minadzuki's use of healing magic had helped the Crimson Queen to recover slightly and launch a counterattack with her blade...

Carrying Hal while he contemplated, the emerald serpentine dragon flew into the sky.

She twisted her body while moving forward, resembling swimming more than flying.

However, about ten minutes after she started flying, a creature came out from nowhere and blocked in front of their graceful journey in the air.

Simply stated, it was a *gray winged dragon*.

Like Rushalka that Hal and Hazumi knew so well, it was a gigantic winged creature.

It lacked forelimbs despite resembling the bodies of dragonkind. Instead of arms, a pair of wings were connected to the shoulders. Furthermore, this wyvern featured even more striking characteristics.

Its head had a crest and the beak was also extraordinarily sharp.

As it result, its entire head looked like a triangle to Hal.

"A pteranodon...?"

The appearance of this flying creature was very similar to the most famous species of pterosaur.

Rather than a category of dragon, it was a *winged dinosaur* in paleobiology. However, one would have to assume there were giant pteranodons from the Cretaceous Period with wings spanning twenty meters in the first place. This winged dragon flew directly towards them.

With its wings spread wide, it rode the wind to glide with agility.

The pair of eyes on the triangular head stared straight at Minadzuki as well as Hal and Hazumi who were riding on her back.

"Maybe we accidentally invaded that thing's territory?"

"W-What should we do, Senpai!?"

"Anyway, let's try driving it off first."

BANG!

Sitting on Minadzuki's back, Hal summoned his magic gun and casually fired a shot.

The bullet of red light traced out a curved trajectory in the air to shoot at the gigantic pteranodon. Hal had no intention of making a direct hit. He wanted the bullet to fly past the pteranodon's head and scare it.

However—

"Runes of Ruruk Soun!?"

Fifteen magic symbols appeared in front of the giant pteranodon.

This arrangement of runes formed a defensive wall to deflect the magic gun's warning shot. The fifteen elite runes signified "shield."

Hal realized.

"Something not a Raptor and not an elite but dragon-like and capable of using Ruruk Soun magic... Is it an ancient leviathan!?"

Genbu-Ou in Princess Yukikaze's service. The octopus dragon subspecies appearing at the Izu waters.

This winged dragon was one of their kind as well as the ancestor of modern leviathans like Minadzuki.

The serpent souls that had appeared during the Hannibal battle were the spirits of ancient leviathans that had lost their physical bodies. However, a leviathan had evidently survived to the present day.

In other words, she was one of King Solomon's minions —

Realizing the giant pteranodon's origin, Hal immediately commanded, "Hurry and deploy imperishable protection!"

Minadzuki instantly responded.

Pearly radiance covered the serpentine dragon leviathan's entire body as well as Hal and Hazumi riding on her back.

In the next instant, the giant pteranodon flew past Minadzuki with a "whoosh" directly above.

When passing by Minadzuki's head, the winged dragon's right hind limb — the four talons on the tip of its foot were like giant sharp swords — delivered a kick at Minadzuki.

This attack was blocked by the light of protection.

Hal felt a pain in his heart. Damage blocked by imperishable protection would accumulate bit by bit in Haruga Haruomi's heart.

"P-Please look at that!"

"As expected of Solomon-senpai's minion... It can use the same tricks as us, right?"

Hazumi pointed out hastily and Hal muttered quietly.

The ancient leviathan in pteranodon form, featuring a wingspan of twenty meters by visual estimates, was also enveloping her gigantic body in pearly light.

Indeed. King Solomon possessed the Rune of the Ring.

Conversely, Hal was the heir to the Bow and the Twin Katana. They were both holders of dragonslaying runes. However, Minadzuki had currently shrunk herself to a size of five meters or so.

There was a decisive disparity in body size.

Furthermore, she was carrying two people on her back.

Fighting a melee air battle under such circumstances could accidentally drop Hal and Hazumi.

"We have a crisis..."

"Senpai! That magic from just now, please use it again!"

Just as Hal gulped in nervousness because of the dire combat situation, Hazumi made a suggestion.

"Okay!"

Realizing her intent, Hal instantly took action.

Carrying his junior's delicate body in his arms, he jumped out. From Minadzuki's back, he leaped into the air, like jumping off the roof of a building. Hal instantly shouted, "Counting on you, Shirasaka!"

"Yes! Don't worry about us, Minadzuki!"

While falling, Hal cast Feather Fall magic on Hazumi and himself.

Meanwhile, Hazumi ordered her partner to cancel miniaturization. The serpentine dragon leviathan swiftly returned to her original size of twenty meters or so.

Hence —

Inside the ark of King Solomon's legacy, a battle began between leviathans, one ancient and one modern.

What a wondrous and unbelievable showdown.

Part 4

Just by using the magic of Feather Fall, one would float lightly towards the ground like a feather.

However, that was only when used by witches. After leveling up repeatedly as a Tyrannos, Hal had even surpassed the power of Level 5 witches.

With Hal as the one using this magic, the rate of descent could be reduced even further.

Falling merely a few centimeters in one minute—Such a difficult feat was possible.

Virtually stationary in the air, Hal watched the violent clash between two leviathans while holding Hazumi in his arms.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Kushahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Minadzuki cried out shrilly while the giant pteranodon roared.

In the next instant, the two leviathans attacked simultaneously. They discharged scorching breath from their mouths.

However, these attacks did not succeed into coming into contact with the other's body.

Due to the pearly light guarding them—imperishable protection—these giant monster breath attacks were kept outside.

"If only I could summon the Crimson Queen at least..."

Seeing both sides well-matched in power, Hal commented quietly.

In that case, he could either overpower the enemy by going two against one or powering up Minadzuki by having her switch to Queen Form. However, this option was not available.

"But Senpai, although winning is impossible if this continues, we won't lose either," pointed out the junior fighting by his side.

Hazumi was experiencing slow free fall together with Hal.

She looked like she was enjoying this stalemate situation a bit.

Despite being a witch, Hazumi had a gentle and honest personality. She probably wanted to minimize harm on both sides.

But in the next instant, the stalemate was broken.

The giant pteranodon used new magic.

"Eh? I remember that's—"

Seeing the fourteen runes of Ruruk Soun, Hal was surprised.

The fourteen high-level runic symbols were shining over the crest on the giant pteranodon's distinctive head. It signified "armistice." Armistice meant "the lowering of weapons."

Hal recalled seeing this arrangement of runes somewhere before...

Just as Hal was puzzling over it, Hazumi widened her eyes.

"Th-The protection vanished!"

"Seriously..."

The two leviathans, one modern and one ancient, were facing off in the air.

The pearly radiance surrounding their gigantic bodies suddenly disappeared. First was the giant pteranodon's protection followed by Minadzuki's.

Hal remembered.

"It was True Genbu-Ou! That guy used the same kind of magic to seal away the Rune of the Arrow and eliminate the Rune of the Bow!"

"D-Do your best, Minadzuki!"

Watching the battle with Hal, Hazumi cried out.

Next, the emerald serpentine dragon began to call out with a voice as beautiful as a musical instrument.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh —

It was a song for invoking pseudo-divinity and using the Rune of the Bow. The air suddenly began to flow, swirling around in a vortex of air currents.

The two leviathans were engaged in aerial combat.

The air around them turned into howling wind, then immediately developed into a tornado to swallow the pteranodon.

Unable to resist the storm's mad rotation, the giant pteranodon was at its mercy.

Minadzuki's pseudo-divinity of Wind was imbuing the tornado with powerful strength and sharpness like blades. The raging wind ravaged the giant pteranodon while turning into vacuum blades, slicing the gigantic body all over.

In addition, it was also infused with the Bow's dragonslaying magical power.

The giant pteranodon's blue blood splattered in the air, turning the spinning storm into a light-blue tornado.

It was quite a tragic sight.

However, Hal still could not rejoice even after seeing Minadzuki gain the upper hand.

"She's cautious as always, but..."

It was possible that Minadzuki committed to using a finishing move because she knew the enemy was very strong.

She understood that under the command of the peaceful Hazumi, the situation would get more and more unfavorable as the battle dragged on. However—

Swallowed by the tornado, even with thousands of lacerations ripped across her body, the pteranodon still refused to fall.

Fifteen runes of Ruruk Soun—the "shield"—protected her body, helping her to barely survive Minadzuki's magic attack.

Next, when the raging storm finally ceased, when the killing wind stopped...

All covered in wounds, the giant pteranodon glided unsteadily to show she was still alive and even used magic.

Over the flying winged dragon, seven runes of Ruruk Soun appeared.

The arrangement signified "healing hand." The "serpent" serving King Solomon had all her injuries rapidly healed, restoring her to her original condition.

"It's like with True Genbu-Ou... A leviathan that has awakened goddess power?"

"Senpai! I will have Minadzuki use that once more!"

"No, let's wait first," said Hal to his brave junior.

"I've got a plan. It'll probably be tough on you, but I hope you can have Minadzuki buy us a bit of time. Just stay on the defensive and focus on resisting the enemy's attacks."

"A-Alright!"

Hazumi agreed to Hal's request and clasped her hands together before her chest.

Entering a prayer pose, she wished for her partner to fight vigorously and safely.

Meanwhile, the showdown between giant monsters in the sky was—

The giant pteranodon finally switched to offense after healing herself. Riding the wind, she swiftly approached Minadzuki and attacked using her four-clawed hind leg.

The serpentine dragon leviathan's body was a beautiful emerald color.

Four scratch wounds were carved on her dragon scales, bleeding four trails of blue blood.

Of course, the battle was not over with this. Minadzuki craned her neck and counterattacked by attempting to bite the enemy.

However, the giant pteranodon rose up swiftly and succeeded in evading.

The pteranodon flew at high speed and attacked Minadzuki again with four claws. Thus, she attacked and evaded repeatedly using this "hit and away" pattern—

Hal glanced at Minadzuki, whom the tides of battle had turned against, and surveyed their surroundings.

There were five sky islands within the airspace of the battle.

Assuming there were no other enemies apart from the pteranodon, *that should most likely be over there*. Hal nodded and fired five consecutive shots with the magic gun in his right.

The five magic bullets flew towards different targets—The five sky islands.

Every island was more than ten kilometers away from Hal and Hazumi who were floating in the air.

Next, Hal closed his eyes.

This was to scout out everything on the ground at each of the five bullet's destinations. This was to confirm what was present and to detect the unorthodoxy.

This was not a feat that a human could accomplish, not even a master-class witch.

However, it was possible for Haruga Haruomi the magic gunner and great sorcerer. As much as he hated to admit it, his magical power had definitely surpassed human limits.

Hal's five magic bullets reached the sky islands and pierced into the ground.

At the same time, he sensed the magical pulsation coming from a temple on a certain island.

"Over there, I see..."

Should he use the magic gun to snipe? No.

Hal shook his head. It was not his style to act like a merciless sniper. More importantly, it would be a poor influence on his assistant and protege.

Then go with a warning. There was one magic spell that came in handy in this kind of situation.

"No helping it. I'll try out that arrangement."

"Huh—?"

Hazumi stared blankly, presumably due to the five runes of Ruruk Soun appearing in front of Hal.

They signified "heat and explosion." Hal's formidable enemy in the past, Pavel Galad, had used this magic before. Hal shot this runic arrangement

with his magic gun and the red bullet of light flew forward along with the five runes.

Naturally, the destination was the sky island where Hal had sensed the pulsation of magic.

"S-Senpai! You're able to use the magic of dragonkind too!?"

"Yeah, I can use it as long as it isn't magic that's too difficult," answered Hal with a sigh.

Due to his increase in power as a Tyrannos, Hal was finally able to draw out the wisdom of Ruruk Soun from his "magic wand," the magic gun.

At this time, the runes of "heat and explosion" reached the target sky island.

The five runes caused a violent explosion on the ground.

Like the previous island they had visited, all these sky islands had was a stone temple, but the flames and blast would not affect the interior. Hence, Hal's objective was only to issue a warning.

"Okay..."

Hal summoned magic symbols to his hand again, three this time.

They were runes of Ruruk Soun, signifying "telepathy." Suppose the other party was a sapient lifeform, it would allow them to communicate across barriers of language and race.

After casting this magic on Hazumi and himself, Hal addressed the giant pteranodon that was using "hit and away" tactics to bully Minadzuki, "Help me pass this message to your partner — Excuse me for making such a cliched threat, but if you don't cease this battle, I won't miss my next shot."

The winged enemy paused so Hal continued.

"I wish to speak with your master and we will be heading to that island now. If you dare escape... I regret I'll have to snipe you in the back. Unless you are an expert highly adept at magic, I don't think you can escape from an attack of the Rune of the Bow, can you?"

He added another threat to prevent the other party from escaping.

When Hal finished, the giant pteranodon suddenly vanished.

The message evidently got through. Obeying the witch with whom she shared a covenant, the ancient leviathan de-materialized.

Next, all Hal had to do was make his way to that sky island —

Hal shrugged at Hazumi and said, "I had a hunch that her partner definitely was nearby. How should I put it? It's because she acted a bit similar to how Rushalka behaves under Asya's command."

This was intuition honed from his many years of observing his childhood friend cooperating with her partner.

Moreover, he was certain that the giant pteranodon's partner was not King Solomon. Otherwise, she would have been using the Rune of the Ring frequently.

Hal had skillfully resolved the situation and Hazumi looked at him in admiration.

"You are amazing, Senpai... I can't believe you drove away the 'serpent' so easily."

"Not at all. I was just lucky."

This was not modesty. Hal was quite serious.

In the event that their encountered opponent was True Genbu-Ou, this trick would not have worked.

Furthermore, Haruga Haruomi made his living as a treasure hunter. Being praised in an area outside his field of expertise would only make him blush.

That being said, this battle might hold important significance.

Hal glanced at the sky island where he had caused a runic explosion.

There was a witch there who controlled an ancient leviathan. She was probably someone in service of Solomon the great sorcerer —

Finally a chance to obtain information.

Hal nodded firmly and prepared to meet the witch he had never seen before.

Part 5

Many lacerations had been left on Minadazuki's body from the pteranodon's claws.

The wounds were definitely not light.

Fortunately, none of them were critical. At this level, the resilient life force of a "serpent" was sufficient for natural healing.

Riding on Minadzuki's back, Hal and Hazumi moved to the newest sky island.

The witch controlling the giant pteranodon should be in the temple on this island.

"Thank you, Minadzuki."

After thanking her partner, Hazumi dispelled her physical form.

Then she entered the temple with Hal.

The ancient kingdom governed by the legendary King Solomon... This facility was probably built during that time period.

Its style was quite similar to Doric architecture as exemplified by the Parthenon of ancient Greece, adorned with simple decorations all over the place without glamor.

Overall, the temple gave a solemn impression, perhaps because only white stone was used to build it.

She was standing next to the entrance.

"I apologize for earlier. My name is Haruga Haruomi and this is my associate, Shirasaka Hazumi. I would greatly appreciate it if you could tell us your name."

Standing next to him, Hazumi nodded in support of Hal's self-introduction.

The other party was a beautiful woman in the prime of youth.

Her deep-set facial features had an exotic air to them. Black hair.

Her figure was extremely outstanding. The red cloth wrapped tightly around her body made her image strongly reminiscent of a passionate exotic dancer.

However, Hal felt something was not quite right.

Just as he was puzzling over "what is this feeling?" The beauty gave her name.

"Shamiram."

A calm and beautiful voice. However, something was still strange.

In any case, Hal decided to ignore this unknown sense of dissonance. The conversation came first.

"So, Shamiram-san."

Although he was still gripping the magic gun, Hal tried to converse in as cordial a tone as possible.

"It's definitely a bit much for me to demand this after doing that with this gun, but I hope you'll talk to us. We don't intend to be unreasonable, so please help—"

"Perfect."

The beautiful Shamiram said lightly as though interrupting Hal.

The smile hanging on her lips was beautiful enough to be called seductive. Or perhaps bewitching would be the right word.

"Lord Tyrannos of the Bow... I intend to seek your help too."

"Huh?"

"I believe in your power and implore you to extend a helping hand... I hope you could release me from the curse imposed upon me by my master."

"Uh—"

Hal was very confused by the beautiful witch from an ancient kingdom, staring at him intently.

Expecting nothing but a brief chat, starting up a conversation first to see whether he could gather any hints to figure out the ark.

That was Hal's original plan, but the other party suddenly brought up an unexpected request. That was not the only problem.

...Hal thought silently to himself.

This older lady's eyes are so sexy. I can't say no to her...Wait, hold on.

He must not allow the ladies to discover such lustful thoughts of his.

He tensed his mind and deliberately asked in a firm voice, "Lady, could you tell me who is this 'master' you speak of?"

"Of course, it is none other than His Majesty, Master Solomon the great monarch of my kingdom. He is the great sorcerer who had inherited the power of the dragonslaying ring—Like you."

"....."

"Serving my master, I was one of the followers of the unorthodoxy. Prior to his death, he commanded me to guard this ship, thus I boarded the ship together with the serpent souls."

"Oh..."

In other words, the manager of a tomb—A gravekeeper?

Shamiram smiled at the nodding Hal, looking like she was tempting him.

"My master's magic cannot be dispelled even if one were to gather a thousand mediocre spellcasters."

"I'd think so too."

"But you are different. At first glance, Lord Tyrannos of the Bow, your power as an adherent to the path of the unorthodoxy is equal to my master's—Given that is the case, I am certain you will be able to lift this spell."

Shamiram the beautiful witch looked at Hal seductively.

Bowing his head to glance at his magic gun as though to escape her gaze,
Hal inquired of his gun.



"Hey, do you know what kind of curse Solomon-senpai cast on her?"

"Follow my orders with absolute obedience'...This is a curse of coercion."

As expected of a former dragon king. Hinokagutsuchi saw through it at a single glance.

A curse of coercion—Hal cocked his head.

"I can't believe he used this kind of magic on his own subordinate. Isn't he being a bit too petty and distrustful?"

It was hard to understand.

Hal did not want to take rash action without figuring out the situation clearly, but—

"Excuse me, Senpai. Can't we help Shamiram-san to lift her curse? I can't believe a spell of absolute obedience was cast, I feel so sorry for her..."

Having remained silent behind him until now, Hazumi walked to Hal's side and spoke sympathetically.

She must have heard Shamiram's request and Hinokagutsuchi's analysis and was moved to pity. Unlike Hal, this junior student was very pure of heart.

If possible, Hal really wanted to reassure Hazumi, but...

He went straight to the point.

"Why did Solomon-senpai cast a curse of absolute obedience on you? Unless this is cleared up, I really can't help you."

"It is very simple. Lord Archer, may I ask you to step over here, please?"

Shamiram beckoned with her hand. Hal walked forward, stopping in front of her.

At that very moment, the beautiful witch from the ancient kingdom took Hal's right hand and drew him closer, making his hand sink into her breast forcefully.

Furthermore, with her left hand superimposed upon Hal's right hand, she exerted more force.

The fabric of Shamiram's garment was quite sheer with a rather low neckline. Thanks to this clothing, Hal was forced to experience "her texture" regardless of whether he wanted to or not.

"B-Boob!?"

He cried out incoherently. Bluntly stated, she had a massive bust.

This extraordinary volume was clearly beyond Orihime's and had even surpassed Luna—

Meanwhile, Hazumi had her eyes widened staring intently at Hal's hand on Shamiram's breast.

It looked like her mind had froze, unable to keep up with the unexpected development.

Then Hal finally recovered from his shock.

"Umm, Shamiram-san?"

"What is it?"

"Your skin is extremely cold... like ice. And it's very taut and hard, not soft at all..."

He commented honestly.

Shamiram smiled back seductively.

"Fufufufufufu."

"Also, I can't feel any heartbeat, pulse or body temperature suggesting life. I don't know if I should say this, but your body seems identical to rigor mortis..."

"Ufufufufu."

"Meaning that, don't tell me you're —"

"It is just as you surmise. I am of the non-living. This body has died once already."

"!?" "

Hearing this overly shocking truth, not only Hal but Hazumi was also rendered speechless.

The earlier sense of dissonance must have been this. By his instinct as a mage, Hal had subconsciously sensed one of the non-living, the presence of death—

"When Master Solomon assigned my mission to me, he took my life... He ordered me to follow him to the grave. Furthermore, my master revived me as the 'living dead' to serve as the gravekeeper in the ark."

The living dead, the undead.

In fantasy RPGs, those in such a state would gather to form a powerful faction. The most representative of them was probably the zombie. Ghouls, ghosts and vampires also fell in this category.

Facing the speechless Hal, Shamiram then admitted, "After all, the living cannot be expected to stay on watch inside the ark with the serpent souls for a thousand years. That must have been what my master thought. In other words, Master Solomon is both my former liege and the one I detest."

Shamiram smiled seductively.

However, all emotion suddenly vanished from her face to show a terrifying and merciless expression, the very image of a death mask.

It was so intimidating that Hal could not help but feel a chill along his spine.

"Consequently, my master cast this curse of obedience on me to prevent me from ever defying him. However, Lord Tyrannos of the Bow, if you could be so kind as to lend your assistance... I would be able to regain my freedom."

What are your thoughts?

Hal did not know how to answer. He never expected the first person to encounter in the ark would be a beautiful witch with this kind of background.

An unexpected development was gradually unfolding upon the battle and grand adventure revolving around Solomon's legacy.

Chapter 2 - The King of Magi Returns

Part 1

The bold and unfettered personality of Hannibal the red dragon king was publicly recognized without contention.

One could call him sloppy or doing things with no planning at all. At this very moment, the strongest king of dragonkind was following his whims, taking a break.

"Well, I guess I've got to get properly rested no matter what."

Lying on the ground uncouthly, he released a great yawn.

This was Hannibal's human form, a well-built red-headed man. He finally took off the red coat that never left his side, casually rolling it up to use as a pillow.

Hannibal's current environment was extremely peculiar.

It was a gray space extending to the horizon. Hannibal was trapped in a bounded field where there was nothing apart from himself.

"Hmm... My last time as captive was four thousand years ago, maybe? Or was it five thousand?"

He tried to recall his vague memories but immediately gave up.

There was no need to remember the exact time. The key point was that "it was very long ago." This kind of adventure surely felt nostalgic.

Hannibal noticed that he was actually quite excited.

"This really takes me back. I used to go around looking for this kind of fun once in a while."

Captured and imprisoned in the enemy commander's castle.

However, he would make full use of his wits and martial prowess, setting himself free and proceeding to exterminate the enemy army for a bit of payback.

During captivity, the spices of boredom, hunger and torture would be added too.

Now that Hannibal thought back, every memory was so wonderful.

Currently, Hannibal had reached the pinnacle of strength and would occasionally reminisce about the fear and nervousness he had felt back then.

"Hmm. I might as well give up a dragon king's power and 'start over.' That'll be pretty amusing."

Grinning, he suddenly began to fantasize.

In addition, the prime culprit imprisoning him was the ghost that the successor of the Bow had summoned from the sea of stars recently. He was haunting the weird ark.

It looked like he was the Tyrannos possessing the Rune of the Ring...

"What a rude and careless guy, he didn't even drop by to say hi."

After locking Hannibal into the gray prison, the other party had not shown up at all.

However, dragon kings possessed extreme senses like beasts. He knew that the enemy or the enemy's lackey was monitoring him from outside the prison at all times.

Hannibal could faintly sense the other party's gaze and wariness.

"Waste of effort."

The red dragon king grinned slightly in mockery.

They should know just by focusing their mind a little.

During the showdown against the Bow user, the red dragon king's heartmetal had suffered serious damage, causing his healing speed and magic recovery to slow down.

It was not time to make a move yet. He could wait longer for more power to return.

That was precisely why Hannibal was yawning in leisure, lounging away to kill time in lethargy. In his current state, he must focus on recuperating.

Hence, the person outside need not be so nervous.

At least for the time being —

"Someone who doesn't get that must be human... Or rather, a human who has never turned into a dragon before?"

He muttered to himself while thinking back.

Princess Yukikaze had inherited the arrow's dragonslaying rune. The adorable white dragon king.

Only capable of an incomplete transformation, that little lass would be considered a half-human, half-dragon existence. However, she understood this principle well.

In that case, should this be relegated as a question of aptitude?

Ultimately, members of the human race were still living creatures, companions of beasts.

Most humans refused to acknowledge and accept this fact, unwilling to take a further step towards becoming "beasts."

On further thought, they were such a weird bunch.

"Well then, what about this kid?"

The young man and Tyrannos who was controlling an "imitation dragon king," a most extraordinary tool.

Hannibal recalled the Bow's successor. What might that guy be doing right now?

"Come, come, Lord Haruga. A drink for you."

"Oh my oh my, ahaha."

"Wow, what a bold drinker you are. Come, another cup."

"Oh my oh my, ahaha... Uh, Shamiram-san, it's a bit much when you're using distilled water to pretend to serve wine."

"Despite saying that, you seem to be quite enjoying yourself."

"Oh my oh my, ahaha."

The dead beautiful witch, Shamiram, was holding a narrow flask in her hand.

From the flask, she poured drinking water into the wine cup in Hal's hand, encouraging him to have a drink.

Looked after by the "pretty older lady" with immaculate care, Hal was feeling a little lustful.

Furthermore, this handcrafted flask looked as though an amateur had sculpted it sloppily.

Bluntly stated, its shape was very ugly. The color was also a dull reddish brown. However, according to Shamiram, the distilled water in the flask never ran out no matter how much you poured.

It was an excellent magic treasure in contrast to its humble appearance.

'Anyway, I'd like to secure food and water first... Do you have any ideas?'

Just earlier, Shamiram had made a request to Hal.

After some contemplation, Hal finally used Dispel magic.

Then after breaking King Solomon's curse, it was Hal's turn to ask for a favor to sate his hunger and thirst. Thus Shamiram led the two of them to a certain sky island.

She said that the temple on that island had treasures capable of creating water and food.

What transported them from one island to the next was the giant pteranodon.



Named Ashkelon, she was the "serpent" under Shamiram's control. With her master, Hal, and Hazumi riding on her back, this ancient leviathan flew lightly to their destination.

Thus, Hal and Hazumi finally tasted food for the first time in a while.

However, it was definitely not a sumptuous meal. The only drink was the distilled water poured out from the magic flask. On the other hand, the only food was—

"Senpai, here you go."

Hazumi handed over an big earthen plate.

This plate was also handcrafted and covered with irregularities. One could tell that its creator had very poor craftsmanship. However, this plate was also a magic treasure.

Just by praying to it, white bread would appear on the plate.

Thus, the plate was currently carrying white bread, summoned by Hazumi's prayer. While thanking his diligent protege, Hal tore off a piece of bread.

...Munch. What terrible taste.

If he concentrated hard, he could sense a bit of sweetness from that starch.

But that was all. Judging from the Japanese standard of putting large amounts of cream and butter into their bread, this was practicably on the level of "tasteless."

This was still very nutritious—Shamiram had told them.

"The manna mentioned in the Bible could very well taste like this," muttered Hal while chewing the almost tasteless bread.

As the creator of the bread, Hazumi smiled with purity and responded to Hal.

"I've heard of that. I remember it was God's food, wasn't it? When Jesus and Moses prayed to God, something that fell from the sky and resembled frost."

"Yes, you're right, that's the one."

"Let me make you something delicious after we escape this place. Although my cooking is nowhere as good as Nee-sama or Asya-san... Will you be willing to try it?"

"That goes without saying!"

"Fufufufu. Thank you."

Hal nodded vigorously in response to Hazumi's suggestion.

This was a heart-to-heart moment between an upstanding senior and his junior. However, Hazumi immediately came back to her senses and looked away stiffly.

It was as though she could not bear to watch the senior's foolishness any longer.

Ahem. Hal cleared his throat and said to Shamiram in a serious tone of voice, "Excuse me, can I ask you to stop messing around?"

"Oh?"

The beautiful witch, Shamiram, used her index finger to lightly caress Hal's inner thigh and said mischievously, "And what do you mean by that?"

"L-Like this kind of inappropriate conduct! Also, there's no need for you to sit next to me and show off your probably H-cup bust and cleavage to me—"

"I can't (stroke-stroke)?"

"O-Of course not."

"But Lord Haruga, I feel as though your face is saying 'more, more'..."

"Unfounded speculation, I can assure you."

Hal protested while feeling surprised and alarmed inside.

Of course, his expression was very serious. However, Shamiram was calmly and confidently using her body to launch a "smiling and stroking" offensive to strike back.

"Is that truly so?"

"A-As the one in question here, my words absolutely cannot be wrong."

"Fufufufu. There is also the possibility you are lying, Lord Haruga. I wish to investigate thoroughly."

Shamiram's commitment to service was very strong.

Apart from letting Hal grope her breast in the beginning, she would touch Hal's body like this from then on, pouring water for him, teasing him in every way possible.

To be honest, the thought of "if only she wasn't dead" had crossed Hal's mind as well as "isn't being alive or dead just a minor detail?", possibly as part of the closet pervert in every man.

Crap, crap. Form is no different from emptiness, and emptiness is no different from form.

When Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara practised the deep Prajnaparamita, he saw that the five skandhas were empty; thus he overcame all ills and suffering...

Hal recited the Buddhist scripture that was about "things with form ultimately end up no different from that which is formless—" in an attempt to coldly push away the beautiful witch from an ancient kingdom.

However, the pair of ostensibly H-cup breasts was making his mind spin, preventing Hal from taking action in a timely manner.

"P-Please wait!"

At that moment, Hazumi suddenly shouted.

"Excuse me, but Senpai already asked you to stop. Shamiram-san, it's time for you to come over and begin your meal too!"

"No no. I have no need to eat. After all, I am already dead."

"!? Sorry, I forgot..."

Hazumi was at a loss when the plate of bread she presented was refused. In contrast, the beautiful witch Shamiram continued nonchalantly.

"Furthermore, Lady Hazumi, this is ultimately only part of my gratitude in return."

"Really...?"

"Indeed. To forget favors and to repay kindness with betrayal would be morally bankrupt and unfit to be called a human being. I wish to be of service to my savior Lord Haruga as much as possible."

"B-But—"

"And judging from Lord Haruga's facial expression, he doesn't seem to be an unwilling participant, does he?"

"That is not true! Senpai isn't supposed to be like that!"

Hazumi yelled at the ancient witch. It was rare to see her so worked up.

It almost seemed like she was jealous of Shamiram. Hal widened his eyes in surprise. On the other hand, Shamiram spoke with a laid back face, "On the contrary. Men at this age are undoubtedly like this. Despite being dead, when a peerless beauty like me takes initiative in approaching him... Lord Haruga's lust will assuredly be stimulated. The evidence is how he furtively glances at my chest."

"I-Is that true, Senpai!?"

Seeing Shamiram explain convincingly, Hazumi wavered and asked with uncertainty.

Naturally, Hal would not be careless enough to show his true colors at such a time. Making full use of his acting skills, he strained to feign composure.

"S-Silly child, how could I possibly do such a thing?"

"Fufufufu. Lord Haruga, you are not very honest, I see," said the deceased, beautiful witch happily.

She even puffed out her chest to show off her pair of breasts that seemed to symbolize the fruits of the land.

Form is no different from emptiness, and emptiness is no different from form. Okay, no problem, sage mode activated successfully.

Shamiram stared at Hal suggestively and said softly, "Well, let us assume that he truly does not have that intention."

She winked. Clearly she was already dead, but why was she still so sexy?

Hal found the witch's mysterious allure unbelievable. In front of him, Shamiram continued to make problematic statements.

"Having caressed my breast with such passion previously, Lord Haruga and I have clearly crossed the line in our relationship."

"Th-That's because you pulled my hand to touch yourself, Shamiram-san."

"Yet you were fondling rather thoroughly..."

In his shock, Hal had accidentally persisted in fondling her. That was the truth and he had nothing to say in defense of that.

However, it was not lust. At least not on the surface. Just as he intended to launch a rebuttal, Hazumi spoke before him.

"Th-Then in that case, it's the same for me!"

"Oh? It is the same for you too, Lady Hazumi?"

"Yes! Senpai has groped me in the chest too! Forcefully, squeezing hard! Shamiram-san, you are not the only special one!"

"S-Shirasaka!?"

"Oh—?"

The adorable junior's sudden confession caught Hal unprepared. Shamiram crossed her arms.

"Lord Haruga... So you are the same as Master Solomon, I see?"

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

The ancient witch answered Hal's question decisively, "Putting his paws on the maidens in his service, philandering outside, wooing them with deception to marry them as concubines—That is what I mean. In the past, I too, was one of Master's beloved concubines, serving at his side."

"....."

"....."

The unexpected situation left Hazumi speechless.

Hal was the same, but he managed to gather his thoughts together, just barely. It would be bad if he continued to remain in this position of disadvantage. It was time to seize initiative back from the deceased witch whose speech and behavior were all so shocking.

"Uh, I'm very interested in Solomon-senpai's exploits alright," said Hal in a serious tone to change the subject. "But let's first discuss our next move. I believe we have two options. One is to have Shamiram-san take us to the exit so that all of us can leave the ark together."

"That probably will not work," the beautiful witch replied apologetically. "There is only one person able to open the ark's entrance arbitrarily, namely, its owner. Naturally, under the current circumstances, it means Master Solomon."

"Then our only choice is the second option."

Hal shrugged and deliberately tried to sound nonchalant.

"We must work together and hijack this ship—in other words, take control by brute force so that we can control it freely."

Part 2

After chatting, refreshments and a meeting...

Hal and Hazumi parted ways with the beautiful witch from an ancient kingdom and were back being alone together.

Riding the miniaturized Minadzuki, they took flight into the sky inside the ark, filled with sky islands. As before, Hazumi rode in front with Hal behind her.

Unlike earlier, they now had a clear target.

Solomon's ark apparently had a control room like in human ships.

Shamiram entered its coordinates into Hal's "magic wand," the magic gun. Truly impressive, an ancient witch. She performed such a high-level technique effortlessly.

"But are you sure we should be splitting up from Shamiram-san?"

"Just as she said, she would have greater freedom to act alone compared to staying with us, who are so conspicuous. She'll extend a helping hand in secret when we're in danger."

After Hal replied to alleviate Hazumi's worries, he lowered his voice.

"Also... In the event that she's lying, it'd be dangerous to be around her too."

"Lying about what?"

"Lying about hating Solomon-senpai and betraying him when she actually intends to conspire against us. Moving around as a group with a traitor in our midst would be quite a hassle since you never know when you'll get stabbed in the back."

Rather than working together while worrying, it would be better to go separate ways—

That was what Hal thought. He wanted to believe in human benevolence as much as possible but they had yet to establish any trust. Trust was not something to offer to others unconditionally.

In contrast, it seemed like Hazumi had not considered that possibility at all. Stunned over there, she looked like she wanted to argue, but she paused to think before speaking. Finally, she said, "You are right... After all, we just met her."

"Yeah. It's unfortunate, but for us, sometimes it's definitely necessary to be more vigilant."

Hal gradually felt his soul soothed by his junior.

Because Hazumi's pure heart, refusing to suspect others unreasonably, moved him a bit.

"B-By the way..."

Hazumi started up another topic of conversation, probably to change the gloomy atmosphere.

"I feel that Solomon-san was not a very decent person."

"Definitely. Forcing a woman who had an intimate relationship with him to follow him to the grave and even using a curse to force her to be his gravekeeper for all eternity, that's definitely beyond fiendish."

"Can't you use your magic to help her, Senpai?"

"I doubt it. I don't think I have any spell that'll come in handy. By this point, even if I release her from her undead state, there's no way for her to reincarnate as a human. There's no spell to help her pass on to nirvana either."

"What a... pity."

Hazumi suddenly stammered then said stiffly, "B-By the way, Senpai, I am so sorry for earlier. I can't believe I said something like 'Shamiram-san, you are not the only special one!'"

"Oh, sure. You surprised me there."

"Umm... I don't quite understand it myself, but at the time, I felt compelled to speak at all costs. I couldn't hold it in no matter what. I felt that had the situation continued, Senpai would've become Shamiram-san's—"

Hazumi was jealous after all?

Jealous of the beautiful ancient witch who seemed like she was about to monopolize Haruga Haruomi with her bold behavior. The instant he realized this, Hal breathed a sigh of relief.

(Has my "big brother" flag finally been raised...!?)

It was just yesterday when he had told Hazumi that "You're feeling jealousy when girls approach me. In other words, this is the sense of loss stemming from your perception of me as something beyond a senior—an older guy akin to an *big brother*!"

At that instant, Hal felt an indescribable surge of emotions in his heart.

"I am truly sorry. Also, I just realized.""

"O-Oh? What did you realize?"

He feigned calmness but could not stop his feelings inside from getting stirred up.

Hal could not help but start to fantasize. He imagined Hazumi confessing to him, "Senpai, you are already 'Onii-chan' to me!" in a shocking development.

What a conundrum. *Am I finally going to gain a little sister of no blood relation?*

However, what Hazumi said was completely outside his predictions.

"Senpai... Do you do the same thing with others as what you did when you touched my breast? Umm, like with Nee-sama or Asya-san..."

"Ah, uh—I won't do that kind of stuff to Asya. Absolutely not."

Strictly speaking, he had done something similar during Rushalka's rebirth.

Even so, Hal still thought of it as a one-time exception that probably would not happen ever again. In fact, his childhood friend was able to use the sun-shooting divine bow successfully without Hal's help. However —

"Th-Then Senpai, sure enough, towards Nee-sama and Luna-san, you will..."

"....."

Hal realized his mistake. To think he had acknowledged the truth with his own mouth!

"I-In order to win against those dragons, there was really a necessity."

All he could do was relate "the truth itself."

Hal did everything he could to tense up his expression and speak in an extremely serious tone. At this rate, he was going to lose his dignity as the "senior."

To break out of this crisis, he spoke from the heart, "In truth, I've never had the luxury of sparing thoughts on other matters during battle."

...This was the truth close to the deepest part of his psyche.

He also knew that "other matters" actually surfaced in his mind during the instants when he had touched Orihime and Luna.

That being said, Hazumi still nodded and agreed with his slightly exaggerated admission.

"I-I get it! Last time, I was facing a great showdown against Hannibal-san too. B-But it's definitely as you say, Senpai... Huh?"

The two of them were riding on Minadzuki, who had shrunk down to five meters or so.

Sitting in front of Hal, Hazumi suddenly held her sides and bent over forward.

"Ah... Ooooooh. M-My stomach hurts..."

"Sh-Shirasaka!?"

Hal wrapped his arms around Hazumi's shoulders from behind and examined her face.

The pain lasted roughly three or four minutes before Hazumi finally recovered. With a haggard look, she said softly, "Sorry... I suddenly acted weird when it crossed my mind that Senpai has done the same thing with Nee-sama and Luna-san, which means they also experienced that kind of feeling."

"I-I see."

It was most likely a stomach cramp caused by severe stress.

Health problems were common for the delicate Hazumi.

Did this mean that the mere thought of a certain guy getting intimate with other girls apart from her would cause stress, then wasn't this the same as an unrequited love...?

No no no. No way that could be possible.

Hal rejected his thought halfway through.

No matter what, this delusion was too self-centered and narcissistic.

Suppose Hazumi "felt that way" towards him, of course, he would almost die from overjoy, but Hal believed this was definitely impossible.

He should first distract Hazumi's focus from the mysterious source of stress.

Hal changed the subject.

"Speaking of which, can you be more specific on what 'that kind of feeling' is like? It's when I was sending magical power into your heart, wasn't it?"

Strictly speaking, it was a ritual to transfer magical power by touching a witch's breast with his palm.

Even now, Orihime and Luna still refused to tell Hal what they had felt. The third test subject, Hazumi, thought in silence for a moment before speaking softly, "It is very hard to describe, but... It felt very pleasurable..."

"Oh? Pleasurable huh."

"Yes. Like being in paradise, every inch of my body was very warm. But as soon as that moment passed, it felt extremely tiring."

Some kind of blissful feeling? Hal hoped it was not addictive like drugs.

Thinking "I see" to himself, Hal nodded.

Hazumi then asked, "Umm... What about you, Senpai?"

"What about me?"

"This body part of mine isn't as big as Nee-sama's or Luna-san's... or Shamiram-san's."

She pressed her right hand on her chest lightly.

Then speaking softly with uncertainty and worry, she said, "I feel very sad... as soon as I wonder if you might dislike this kind of size, Senpai. Sorry, if only I were bigger."

"W-W-W-What are you talking about, Shirasaka!?"

Hal shouted in shock.

"Although I'd definitely say 'the bigger the better' if forced to pick, that doesn't mean I reject the value of flat chests! I really like ones on the small side like yours too!"

Only after saying that did Hal realize he had misspoken.

He thought "what the heck did I say in desperation—" to himself but the weird thing was that Hazumi listened to his problematic statement to the very end and nodded.

And she even smiled with happiness.

"Really? Fufufufu, I am so glad."

"....."

Seeing his junior react with unexpected cuteness, Hal felt his heart skip a beat with a forceful "badump", then immediately —

Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu —

Minadzuki called out softly.

Minadzuki was the "serpent" with whom Hal had established a covenant through Hazumi. Hence, he could immediately sense her intent. This was a warning.

Through her superlative senses of a leviathan's, she had detected the approach of a dangerous enemy.

"Shirasaka, land at the nearest island."

"U-Understood. Is it Solomon-san?"

"Very likely. Be careful."

Hazumi also understood her partner's warning.

She immediately followed orders with a "Yes!", gently stroking Minadzuki's back.

As a result, the emerald serpentine dragon flew to the sky island three or four kilometers ahead, landing on it and taking a prone position.

Hal and Hazumi instantly leaped to the ground.

Then they turned their heads to search the sky. A crimson elite dragon was slowly flying over from a certain direction. The two of them spotted the beautiful figure surrounded by flames.

Unmistakable. It was the Crimson Queen.

It was the body of the dragon king that King Solomon had stolen from Haruga Haruomi.

"A direct showdown against Senpai at last huh..."

Muttering to himself, he summoned his magic gun.

Part 3

Hal and Hazumi arrived at a new sky island and prepared for battle.

As the only leviathan available, of course Minadzuki was expected to play a pivotal role. Shrunk down in size previously, Minadzuki now returned to her original size at Hazumi's orders.

The emerald serpentine dragon craned her neck over Hal and Hazumi, staying vigilant.

The Crimson Queen was up ahead within view.

Originally used by Hal as a trump card, the dragon king body had now fallen under King Solomon's control. She flew slowly to approach the sky island where Hal and Hazumi were.

Following the queen were seventy-two blue-white ghostlights.

The flickering ghostlights in the air all had the same shape—Dragonoid forms.

"They are all 'serpents' that have lost their physical bodies... Aren't they?"

"Yeah. The spirits of leviathans—serpent souls."

Hazumi asked uneasily and Hal replied calmly.

"Speaking of which, Shirasaka, I suppose you didn't get to see it? Before Akuro-Ou received her physical body, she was also hanging around in shadow form like that."

"S-So many..."

"The story of the seventy-two demons serving King Solomon probably came from them. That being said, I totally can't tell which one is Baal and which one is Asmodeus."

Baal, Dantalion, Marchosias, Asmodeus, etc.

These were all the names of demons that had served Solomon. Many of them originally came from "pagan gods outside of the Jewish faith."

Demoting the gods of foreign peoples and countries to evil deities and monsters was an act of narrow-mindedness and intolerance.

In any case, the elite dragon clad in crimson flames was flying over, leading an army of what looked like blue-white fireballs—

Hal's lineup consisted only of himself, Hazumi and Minadzuki. It was worrying.

In addition, several hours earlier, Minadzuki had fought Shamiram and her "serpent" Ashkelon, using up one invocation of pseudo-divinity in the process.

Minadzuki's partner, Hazumi, was a Level 2 witch.

She could only order Minadzuki to use pseudo-divinity one more time today...

"Shirasaka, take care to choose your timing for using pseudo-divinity."

"Y-Yes!"

"By the way, during the fight against Hannibal, Minadzuki used healing magic at the end—Is there any way of having her use it again?"

"Sorry, I... do not know how."

She probably felt very guilty for giving a negative response.

Hazumi looked at Hal sadly with a layer of gloom on her adorable face. Her gaze seemed almost magical. Hal felt as though he was going to be sucked into that pair of large eyes.

"Since it was magic that Minadzuki used without my awareness... Also, even if I asked her to do the same thing again, the request probably won't reach her. That was what Hinokagutsuchi-san said before."

"Come to think of it—"

Hal recalled the conversation on the whale watching cruise.

Trying to exert wanton control over creatures connected to the lineage of the gods would be an act of disrespect.

Mankind's only method of approaching the gods was to offer sincere prayers.

Well, it's probably because of that, thought Hal. Precisely because of that, Hazumi, who was purer and more innocent than any other modern witch, was the only one who drew out "goddess power" from her partner—A very likely possibility.

"I understand. I'll just think of it as a stroke of luck if it works out smoothly. Anyway, let's focus on defense first."

"Yes!"

"Follow the enemy's movements and the rest is just improvising."

They did not have enough combat power to strike preemptively... Hal deliberately withheld this.

The crimson dragon king leading blue-white ghostlights versus the emerald serpentine dragon leviathan.

King Solomon's vassals were going to clash violently with Haruga Haruomi's vassal.

First, the serpent souls started to sing.

Ahhh...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Hal realized suddenly in alarm. He had heard this song not too long ago.

During the intense battle against Hannibal in the New York wasteland, when Hal was facing off against the injured dragon king, the serpent souls had been singing in unison as they were doing now. After hearing that song, Hal and the others had lost consciousness...

Definitely beyond a doubt. It was a kind of psychological attack.

Its purpose then was to capture Hal, Hazumi and Hannibal in one fell swoop while they were unprepared—

"Come closer, Shirasaka!"

This time, Hal must protect the bodies and minds of himself and his protege.

He waved and Hazumi rushed to his side with a "Yes!" Hal jumped in surprise next because Hazumi hugged him tightly as though throwing herself into his embrace.

"N-No need to be that close, you know!?"

"S-Sorry! I got too excited, also—"

Holding Hal tightly, she replied, slightly troubled.

"Senpai, Nee-sama and you were doing this before... So I was wondering whether it was necessary when receiving magical power."

After replying, the fourteen-year-old Hazumi cringed in embarrassment.

She was probably embarrassed now that she became aware of her and Hal "hugging together." As a result, she was about to move away when Hal said hastily, "S-Staying in this posture is fine too. It's pretty convenient as well!"

After saying that, Hal deployed imperishable protection.

The pearly light first enveloped the hugging senior and junior then expanded to cover the entire body of Minadzuki who was in the air preparing for the incoming attack.

Last time, Hal and Hannibal had exhausted themselves to the point of being unable to deploy imperishable protection.

Whether or not his defenses hold this time—

Ahhh
h...!

The instant the choir of the seventy-two serpent souls reached the climax, the Crimson Queen opened its jaws wide and expelled a gray shadow.

Carrying evil magical power, the "grayness" gradually swallowed Hal's group.

It swallowed Minadzuki's giant body that was facing off against the queen in the air as well as Hal and Hazumi, hugging on the ground —

But this time, imperishable protection's vaunted absolute defense blocked the attack for them. The gray shadow was rendered powerless. They neither fell asleep nor entered a dream.

However, Hal's heart had to suffer through twenty seconds worth of intense pain.

No helping it. This was the price for maintaining imperishable protection.

"So this is Solomon-senpai's killer move huh..." Hal muttered to himself.

Sacred words were glowing over the head of the stolen Crimson Queen.

Seventeen runes of Ruruk Soun were arranged to signify "You will be enthralled by the land of dreams to wander in the lost garden for eternity."

In addition, by the time Hal noticed, the golden ring had also manifested in front of the queen.

A diameter of seven meters. This was the appearance taken by the Rune of the Ring after manifesting as an instrument of magic control.

"This is a trump card that was able to take out a dragon king and us together in a one-hit knockdown. It'd be too much of a cheat unless it only worked when the opponents left themselves wide open."



In boxing terms, it would be a hard punch achieving a one-hit knockout.

However, it would be the type that was effortless to defend against because the motion was so telegraphed that one could tell from a single glance.

They would never fear that type of attack again— As much as Hal wanted to say that, he frowned. If he and Minadzuki were to collapse from exhaustion, they would not be able to defend against this trump card.

In that case, he must avoid fighting a protracted battle of attrition...

Unconcerned with Hal's worries, the Crimson Queen and Solomon's ring started to move again.

First, the seventy-two serpent souls behind the queen flew up one after another, circling around in flocks. This action did not seem very meaningful.

However, the serpent souls offered magical power to Solomon while they flew, supporting him.

Their presence alone was already helping him. With their support, the Crimson Queen reached out with her right hand to grab the golden ring.

It was the manifested Rune of the Ring. As though throwing a frisbee, the queen launched it out.

The target was Minadzuki, the emerald serpentine dragon.

"Minadzuki, please!"

Hazumi shouted from the ground.

The serpentine dragon, twenty meters in length, responded to her plea and squirmed with agility, dodging the ring the enemy had thrown.

That lightning-like speed was like a snake on a hunt.

Furthermore, Minadzuki attacked the Crimson Queen while evading. She tried to bite the red dragon king's throat.

However, her teeth were blocked by imperishable protection.

The Crimson Queen had immediately deployed the pearly barrier.

If Hal was a Tyrannos, so was King Solomon. As fellow holders of dragonslaying runes, in addition to magical power, their defensive ability was virtually equal too—

Thus, Minadzuki and the queen fought in the air.

The queen extended her crimson right arm, attacking Minadzuki's head with her five sharp claws.

Minadzuki's slender body of a serpentine dragon twisted like a whip and struck the queen's body.

However, both sides were defended by imperishable protection, thus both attacks failed to inflict damage.

Even so, they still did not give up, engaging in an intense melee battle.

For instance, the queen opened her jaws to bite Minadazuki and she bit back.

Minadzuki wrapped herself around the queen's gigantic body, constricting her. Using her dragonoid limbs as human arms and legs, the queen punched and kicked Minadzuki—

Pointblank range, completely merciless, a violent back and forth.

However, every attack proved ineffective against imperishable protection no matter what. Both sides remained unscathed. Even so, this battle was not perfectly balanced.

"Ugh...!"

"Senpai! Your chest—Is your heart hurting!?"

Hal and Hazumi had been hugging the whole time.

However, Hal suddenly fell to his knees. Hazumi frantically tried to catch and support him.

Earlier, the Crimson Queen had thrown the golden ring—

Like a fierce bird of prey with its own consciousness, it kept flying in the air, inflicting damage by crashing hard into Minadzuki while she was wrestling against the queen.

In other words, Minadzuki was facing two enemies alone.

Even with the defense from imperishable protection, attacks imbued with dragonslaying power would still transmit to Hal's heart.

Whenever the golden ring flew into Minadzuki's back, body, or back of the head, Hal would feel an impact against his heart.

He and Minadzuki had been roped into an unavoidable battle of attrition.

"It looks pretty bad..."

"Oh! Please look into the sky, can you see it!?"

Hazumi suddenly said to the groaning Hal.

He looked at the sky where she was pointing.

A winged dragon was flying at high speed. The altitude was much higher than where the queen and Minadzuki were fighting. Flying to approach them, it seemed as though she were about to traverse the battlefield — It was Ashkelon.

The pteranodon leviathan was the partner of the Shamiram the beautiful witch.

"Shamiram-san has come to aid us!"

"Looks like it, but... she's probably having a tough time, unable to get close to us."

"Huh?"

Hazumi was very surprised. Hal sighed and said, "By the way, Ashkelon is also one of Solomon-senpai's vassals. Even if she wants to fly over here and help, she can't oppose her original master."

"....."

"That's why the most she could do was watch from afar."

Hazumi looked at Hal in worry while he explained.

Then she looked up with determination and stood up. Showing strong resolve in her eyes, she looked into the air, staring intently at the Crimson Queen and the golden ring.

Their combined offensive struck Minadzuki again and again.

"If even Shamiram-san can't help you, Senpai... Then I will be the one to try!"

Hazumi declared loudly but Hal shook his head.

"Hold on, Shirasaka. By trying, what kind of method are you going to use...!?"

"I will make a request of Minadzuki to attack the queen with the most powerful magic."

"I-It'd be good if it worked, but you probably won't be able to do it alone. If only one of either Asya or Juujouji were here, perhaps it'd be worth a try —"

"H-However!"

In that instant, Minadzuki called out in a clear voice.

Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

The emerald serpentine dragon leviathan's right forelimb was holding a jewel. The jewel was glowing white with dazzling brilliance. At the same time, Hal sensed it.

Something resembling a sacred presence was currently descending from the sky.

This presence was absorbed into Hazumi beside Hal.

"Oh?"

Having remained silent all this time, Hinokagutsuchi mused from within the magic gun.

For a self-styled devil, it was definitely a rare expression of praise. Next, Hazumi herself shook as though shocked by electricity and her eyes went blank.

But she immediately regained her senses and moved in close to Hal who was kneeling on the ground.

"Senpai, please stop releasing power here."

Her tone was solemn while she stroked Hal's chest with her right hand.

It was right above the heart. The sudden instruction made Hal go "huh?" blankly.

"This little lady has received an oracle. If you do as she says, something good may happen."

Speaking from within the magic gun, Hinokagutsuchi's low voice seemed like she was snickering.

Hazumi was gazing at Haruga Haruomi with eyes of serious sincerity.

This was a suggestion she had offered without going through a normal sequence of explanations. However, Hal nodded subconsciously and followed her directions.

Oh well, either way, it's a hopeless crisis in front of us.

He focused his consciousness on his heart, the heartmetal that he had inherited from Hinokagutsuchi —

It was the most important organ of dragonkind. Hal ceased its functions completely. Next, the magical power provided by Hal was cut off abruptly, causing the light of protection surrounding Minadzuki to disappear without a trace.

However, the pearly glow around the Crimson Queen also vanished immediately.

"Huh!?"

Hal was greatly shocked. Before his eyes, the Crimson Queen even froze.

It remained motionless, unable to even hover in the air. The Crimson Queen began to fall. At that very instant—

Kushahhh!

The giant pteranodon, Ashkelon the ancient "serpent" howled loudly.

It was the partner of the witch Shamiram who had been observing the battle from afar the whole time. Ashkelon's entire body gradually became enveloped in orange flames.

Like Akuro-Ou, Ashkelon possessed the pseudo-divinity of Fire.

Rather than a fiery bird, she had turned into a flaming pteranodon, flying at the Crimson Queen at high speed. Then with her body in such a state, she collided, sending the Crimson Queen flying.

This attack caused the Crimson Queen to start crumbling.

The dragon's giant body turned into particulate matter, gradually collapsing.

In addition, the seventy-two serpent souls circling in the air also scattered and fled.

"That was so easy..."

The unexpected victory left Hal stunned on the spot, muttering to himself. Then he noticed.

The Crimson Queen belonged to Haruga Haruomi to begin with. The heartmetal it used as a source of magical power had also merged with Hal's heart.

In that case, if he were to stop providing magical power, of course the queen would be affected—

It was a very simple principle.

But in the midst of battle, it was not that easy to realize this principle. The one who had informed him of this, Hazumi, was currently watching Hal with a gentle smile.

The gentleness, innocence and adorability in her expression was making Hal's heart pound.

"—!?"

At that moment, he jumped in surprise.

The golden ring had suddenly appeared over Hazumi's head.

With a diameter of seven meters or so, it was the manifestation of the Rune of the Ring—Solomon's instrument of magic control. The instant the ring released magical power, Hal also pulled the magic gun's trigger.

Full auto fire.

This was his last resort of self-defense held in reserve until now as a precaution.

Fired upon by thirty bullets of red light, the golden ring vanished.

Unfortunately, rather than being destroyed by the attack, it had escaped. After suffering a certain degree of damage, Solomon's ring made the call to escape and vanished as a result.

However, this was after casting a curse that fell under the category of psychological attacks.

Invading Hal's brain through his ears, the curse began to rampage madly.

"Warghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Senpai!?"

Hazumi cried out in panic.

Hal wanted to tell his adorable protege "don't worry" but was unable to voice these words. His consciousness gradually faded. His thoughts lost clarity.

Hazily, he thought to himself.

Looks like the second round ended in a double knockout... I've got to put an end to this next time.

Then his vision turned into total blackness.

Part 4

"...So, Haruga-kun, I would like you to show some serious contrition," said Juujouji suddenly to Hal.

Hal went "huh?" and tilted his head, then asked, "Contrition for what?"

"Despite knowing my feelings, you still did *that* with Luna-san and even subjected Hazumi to it too. You must repent for your grave sins."

"Oh, umm..."

Very recently, Haruga Haruomi and Juujouji Orihime's relationship had advanced further.

'Am I allowed... to love you, Haruga-kun? Or is romance within the team forbidden?'

'O-Of course, you're allowed, Juujouji!'

The above exchange even took place between them.

Hence, Orihime had the right to admonish Hal.

Hence, there should be nothing wrong about her scolding Hal like this.

"Haruga-kun, you are a boy, so I cannot blame you for being a 'closet pervert'... However, when you keep making perverted moves on other girls when you already have me, there is a huge problem! Because as a man—no, as a person—two-timing is the worst!"

"Uh, I-I guess it's bad?"

Orihime was condemning him for his perversion and being the worst.

Rather than indignation spurring him towards denial, what Hal experienced first was he felt intensely shaken inside.

In truth, he felt quite guilty too. Although there was a kind of legitimacy, engaging in that behavior was ultimately not too good.

Only roughly a month had passed since the summer vacation began.

During this short period, he had already touched Orihime, Luna and Hazumi's breasts...

"I-I have to defend myself a little," Hal stammered.

"Unless I did that, I wouldn't be able to send magical power to you or the others. On those occasions, I only did it because you were not by my side. I tried my best to stay away from perverted thoughts... I think... I have evidence to prove my innocence..."

Under Orihime's angry gaze, his speech grew more and more incoherent.

In the end, in addition to Orihime's accusations, Hal was burdened by a guilty conscience inside as well, thus preventing him from denying allegations assertively.

Hal was painfully aware of this fact.

...Oddly enough, now that he thought about it, things had been different prior to summer.

Previously, Orihime was the only one whose breast he had pressed his palm firmly against in order to contact the heart. Back then, the girl named Juujouji Orihime already held a special place in Haruga Haruomi's heart.

Indeed. In fact, he had never met a girl like her.

Very feminine yet lively and outgoing. Lacking neither kindness nor courage...

When they first met, Hal even wanted to keep his distance from Orihime — No, that was because he found Orihime's special traits too dazzling to behold.

He could not help but feel gradually attracted to a type of person he had never interacted with before.

The reason why Hal had deliberately stayed away from Orihime was very likely because he had some vague self-awareness...

"Huh?"

Hal suddenly felt doubt when his thoughts reached this point.

How could Orihime know that he did *that* to Hazumi?

Hazumi had personally told her — Impossible, because they had parted ways during the Hannibal battle and never had a chance to meet up again so far.

Hence, Hal decided to stop thinking about his relationship with Orihime for now.

He should have spent the past half a day or so with Hazumi, planning how to escape the ark—

"Wait, Orihime-san!"

These words came from a new arrival.

"You are not the only one who loves Harry!"

"Luna-san, when did you arrive!?"

Luna Francois was standing between the dumbfounded Orihime and Hal.

"Fufufufu. Orihime-san, you may have been the first to win Harry's affections... However, I would advise you not to forget this."

The lips of the blonde beauty in the black formal dress curled to reveal an alluring and bewitching smile.

"I was the first to confess. I was also the first to share a passionate kiss with Harry. Not only that, but I never faltered at the prospects of marrying Harry and starting a new life. Bluntly stated, in terms of resolve, you are no match for me, Orihime-san, not even you..."

"Th-This isn't a matter of doing things earlier or later!"

Orihime complained defiantly. However, Luna remained calm and composed.

"You are correct. However, Orihime-san, my love is more 'substantial' than yours in various ways, isn't it?"

More aggressive than anyone, the American girl spoke softly.

She leaned herself against Hal all at once, even whispering in his ear. The pair of G-cups were pressing against Hal's chest.

Volume and softness that could not be ignored, yet that was not all.

The sensation also felt unbelievably elastic.

"Furthermore, Harry."

"Y-Yes?"

"If you were to choose me, Luna Francois Gregory, as your partner... I am confident that I will make sure you never regret it. You know that, don't you?"

Luna Francois was brilliant, calculative and deeply in love.

She was definitely capable of turning this declaration into reality. More importantly, the thought of "the calculative Luna willing to sacrifice so much for me" was quite a clinching factor for Hal —

Hal knew it himself.

Rather, he was deeply moved by what would be a bad girl's depth of affection.

In addition, he felt free and unfettered when working with Luna, unlike the sheltered young lady who had no exposure to shady underground work. There was a "sense of liberation" as though returning to one's homeland.

Luna Francois and Juujouji Orihime.

Facing these two, Hal felt extremely shaken.

How should he decide and act? His mind was filled by this question.

However, Hal noticed something else that was odd. Why was Luna here as well? He had clearly asked her stay in Tokyo New Town —

At this moment, he heard faint crying from somewhere —

"I get it now."

Hal figured it all out. So that was what was going on.

"This kind of psychological attack is Solomon-senpai... or rather, the ring's specialty."

He closed his eyes and focused his consciousness on his heart.

Producing magical power from his heart, he used it to activate the power of dragonbane in his right palm.

What Hal selected was not the Bow but the Rune of the Twin Katana.

Although he could not confirm due to his tightly shut eyes, he felt the cross-shaped rune surfacing on the center of his palm.

"Excuse me but I've had enough of the ring's psychological attacks."

Hal poured magical power into the rune on his right hand and slowly opened his eyes.

Instantly, Orihime and Luna Francois disappeared from his side. More precisely, they were Haruga Haruomi's indecision and distress that had manifested through the Ring's psychological attack.

Magic for severing and erasing malicious spells, evil energies and wicked spirits—

This was precisely the domain of the Rune of the Twin Katana. It succeeded again.

His vision turned dim again.

In the next instant, Hal returned to the sky island.

Lying on the ground, he had apparently slept for several minutes.

Hal immediately got up. However, since he did not want to stand yet, he sat cross-legged.

...Hazumi was staying by his side.

There were traces of tears on her face, presumably due to extreme worry for the unconscious Hal.

"Senpai, you came back!"

"Sorry, it looks like I worried you. But I'm already ok —"

He jumped in surprise because Hazumi suddenly hugged him. As though trying to topple him over while he was sitting cross-legged, she pounced on him.

"Sorry! It was all because I asked you to stop your magical power...!"

"D-Don't say that."

At a loss what to do, Hal comforted Hazumi gently.

"It's all thanks to your suggestion that we were able to fight off Solomon-senpai swiftly. My injuries are nothing."

Also, the distant crying he had heard during the psychological attack —

At the time, Hal was convinced that it was definitely Hazumi's voice. She must have been crying, feeling responsible for the situation.

Precisely because of that, he had come to his senses at that instant and counterattacked.

"I'm doing great, so you don't have to cry so much."

He patted Hazumi's back while she sobbed quietly, asking her not to cry.

Even if he really had a little sister, Hal doubted whether he would comfort her like this. Ever since he was young, Haruga Haruomi had been a cold egoist. Acting like a reliable older man as he was doing now did not match his style and was making him feel a little embarrassed.

However, if this was enough to stop the tears falling from his junior's eyes, it would be a trivial burden to bear.

"Sorry, I panicked a lot when I thought you would never open your eyes again, Senpai..."

The kindhearted girl immediately stopped crying.

Hazumi's eyes were red from crying, but she still smiled demurely at Hal and quickly separated herself from him.

He had forgotten. Until just a moment ago, they had been hugging together.

Finally, Hazumi sat down politely in seiza roughly half a meter away from the cross-legged Hal, face to face.

Then she smiled again.

This time, it was an angel's smile. Her innocent smile as always.

"Fufufufu. I don't know the reason, but I currently feel the same as I did earlier. Very happy and satisfied."

"As you did earlier?"

"Yes. Umm... Like when you said that chests like mine are fine too."

"....."

The angelic smile was always supreme in soothing Hal's soul.

However, this time it made Hal's heart skip a beat. For some reason, he sensed something "womanly" about Hazumi's vibe.



Was it because he had touched her chest earlier and delivered magical power into it?

Was it because the discussion topic had been a bit perverted just now? Was it because he had felt the sensations of her delicate limbs directly after embracing Hazumi earlier?

Or was it because—some kind of change had occurred to Hazumi?

Could it be all of the above?

The pounding of his heart was disrupting Hal's thoughts more and more. At that moment—

"Lord Haruga."

Shamiram called out to him. Unnoticed by him, she had arrived by his side.

Truly elusive in her comings and goings. However, she was an ancient witch and no ordinary person. This was nothing to be surprised about. Hal replied calmly, "It was quite a close shave, but at least we overcame the crisis."

"I am terribly sorry for not helping much. After all, my covenant was formed with Ashkelon, who is also one of the vassals serving Master Solomon..."

"Helping to deal the final blow to the Crimson Queen was more than enough."

Hearing Hal say that, Shamiram smiled.

"Thank you, Lord Haruga. It is most fortunate that you and Lady Hazumi are unharmed and even hitting it off."

"Hitting it off?"

"Fufufufu. Excuse me but I saw everything. The moment when the two of you embraced passionately, confirming each other's safety and affections."

"....."

Shamiram smiled suggestively.

Hal wondered if he should clear up the beautiful witch's misunderstanding but chose to shut up in the end. If she viewed Hazumi as "Hal's romantic partner," she would rein in her overly passionate services.

Hazumi said happily, "Do Senpai and I seem that close?"

"Yes. Besides, Lady Hazumi, for you to do that undeterred by the fact that Ashkelon and I were watching from the side, do not claim that you two are not hitting it off."

No, but don't brothers and sisters hug each other too?

Next to Hal who was thinking silently, Hazumi smiled innocently.

"That is definitely true... I am somewhat glad. Fufufufu."

What was going on? From appearances, Hazumi seemed almost like a girl secretly in love with Hal, except that she had not discovered these feelings herself.

...Could it be *that*?

...No no no. Definitely not likely.

Anyway, one must not jump to conclusions. Also, if such thoughts of his were to come to light, it would undermine his dignity as the senior.

"By the way, Lord Haruga. The rune you used just now —"

While Hal was desperate, trying hard to stop the pounding in his heart from showing on his face, Shamiram said to him, "An interesting spiritual power seems to reside within it. The vanquishing of evil to uphold justice—A grand technique of exorcism, how astounding. Lord Haruga, do your powers of dragonslaying include more than just the bow?"

"It seems to be a rune of twin swords."

Hal opened his right hand to reveal the cross-shaped runic symbol.

After examining it for a while, the ancient beauty said in puzzlement, "Hmm... With just the spiritual power of this rune, it should only take you one hit to purify dead souls lingering in the living world such as myself or my master."

"You can see that? You're amazing."

Hal was very impressed by Shamiram's eyes of wisdom.

The Rune of the Twin Katana was capable of severing evil energies. In that case, one would expect it to be very effective against the likes of ghosts and the living dead.

However, an ordinary slash could not inflict a critical blow against a ghost of King Solomon's level.

Ultimately, Hal hoped to land a strike powered by a technique of assured annihilation.

"This rune is a bit hard to control. Right now, I don't think I can draw out more power than I did just now."

Hal still did not trust her completely, so he gave an ambiguous reason.

The twin katana's technique of assured annihilation was a mystic technique of extreme difficulty. Even Asya and Luna Francois were unable to use it singlehandedly.

Even if he asked Hazumi, his only companion at the moment—

Very unfortunately, given her capabilities, it most likely would not go well.

"What a shame when you have this rare sharp blade... No, hold on."

Shamiram suddenly began to ponder.

"In that case, allow me and Ashkelon to confer the spiritual power of exorcism to your Bow, Lord Haruga."

"Huh?"

Hal was taken aback. Shamiram continued, "If you attack my master using two types of dragonslaying power simultaneously... Victory might be yours."

"Is that kind of thing possible!?"

"Leave it to me. After all, like Lady Hazumi, I possess the ability to control a goddess' spiritual power."

If the sword of exorcism alone was unable to erase the evil spirit, just add a bow of exorcism.

The beautiful witch from the ancient kingdom brought up a simple theory effortlessly. The modern and inexperienced witch asked in surprise, "E-Excuse me. May I ask what do you mean by like me?"

"Didn't you experience it just now? Minadzuki is her name, isn't it? Praying to a 'serpent' that has a goddess' divinity residing within her so that she sends down an oracle to show you the right path."

Like healing magic, it was an outcome arising from special techniques.

"I remember that move, isn't it impossible to perform using pseudo-divinity of ordinary alignments...?"

Hal muttered.

Modern leviathans basically fell under one of the four attributes of Earth, Water, Fire or Wind. At the same time, there were "serpents" with extremely special attributes, such as Rushalka's Moon or Glinda's Gravity.

However, goddess power did not belong to any attribute.

"Well, Lady Hazumi, you seem to still be unfamiliar with this path...

However, a priestess capable of awakening the 'sacred goddess' aspect of a serpent' is extremely rare."

The ancient priestess stared straight at Hazumi and spoke quietly.

"I believe you are already amazing simply for achieving this. Yes."

There was nothing alike between the uninhibited Shamiram and the innocent Hazumi.

However, Hal expected Shamiram would be considered as having a special and outstanding talent among the priestesses serving King Solomon, possibly even surpassing modern master-class witches.

Sufficient to be chosen as the gravekeeper out of King Solomon's numerous retainers and favored concubines.

Apparently skilled in 'this path' since ancient times, the senior witch was showing an expression of worldly wisdom while praising the junior who had been born in the modern era.

Chapter 3 - The Ring's Whereabouts

Part 1

Conferring the spiritual power of exorcism onto Hal's Bow.

After announcing that, Shamiram looked up at the sky. A pteranodon with a wingspan of twenty meters was slowly circling overhead.

The deceased covenantee summoned the ancient leviathan, Ashkelon.

"O Ashkelon, my friend who shares our covenant. Grant me the power to lead lives that have returned from the realm of the dead back to where they belong—the garden of repose!"

Ashkelon was flying ten-odd meters over the island where Hal, Hazumi and Shamiram were.

With her wings outstretched, she was gliding on the wind, circling according to the air currents. As soon as she heard instructions, she flapped her right wing gently.

Next, nine runes of Ruruk Soun descended from her right wing.

They signified "purification of evil spirits." This was the spiritual power of exorcism—The sacred mystic technique used by Shamiram and Ashkelon as a team.

From what Hal could tell using his eyes of a Tyrannos, there was nothing suspicious about this mystic spell.

Still, just to be on the safe side, Hal decided to confirm.

(Is that magic really okay?)

(Oh? You are quite distrustful, brat.)

(It's true Shamiram-san helped us out just now... But ultimately, Solomon-senpai hasn't been destroyed.)

Hal was speaking to Hinokagutuschi who was mocking him from inside the magic gun.

Since they were conversing mentally through a bond of magic, no one else could hear their dialogue.

(The battle could've been staged to win our trust.)

(Indeed that is possible. Regardless, the spell used by not-completely-dead woman seems to be above board.)

(Got it. Say, are you in any position to mock another person as 'not-completely-dead' when you're a ghost?)

In any case, it seemed fine.

Hal pointed the magic gun up at the sky. The runes of Ruruk Soun falling from Ashkelon's right wing were all absorbed by the "magic wand."

Thus, it was imbued with the power of exorcism.

"Next up is a decisive showdown against my master."

"Yeah, but we just fought a great battle."

Hal glanced at the other witch.

Hazumi had made Minadzuki use pseudo-divinity twice today. As a Level 2 witch, she could not issue the order again.

"Let's take a break for now. We need to catch our breath."

"Is that so? By the way, Lord Haruga, may I ask you for a favor?"

Shamiram suddenly made a suggestion.

"Suppose things were to progress smoothly, after we escape from this ark... I would like you to slice me with your twin blades."

"But, if I do that..."

Hal understood. She was different from King Solomon.

Once he did that, she would disappear from this world in an instant.

Hoping for her own "death," Shamiram showed an aloof expression in front of Hal for the first time.

Without any lingering attachments to "life" as a member of the undead, she showed thorough enlightenment on her face!

There was even a calm smile on her face.

"It has been over a thousand year since I followed my master to the grave. Unlike the peers of dragonkind, the Tyrannoi... such as my master or you, Lord Haruga, I find that these long years have been too protracted and too burdensome for a mortal like me."

"....."

"It is about time for me to make my way to the underworld."

Hal still did not trust this ancient beautiful witch completely.

However, he wanted to believe in her words. Hal was just about to nod in agreement when Hazumi spoke before him.

"N-No, you can't. How could anyone say they want to go to the underworld..."

"This is nothing. In my current state, I am no different from having one foot in the coffin."

"B-But... How about this? When Senpai seizes Solomon-san's ship, he could let you be the captain, Shamiram-san, to go wherever you wish..."

Coming with all kinds of ideas, she tried to change Shamiram's mind.

Without responding directly, Shamiram told them, "Lady Hazumi, you are truly a kindhearted girl. However, this is the one thing I cannot agree. If you wish to be a priestess serving at Lord Haruga's side, to become the spokesperson for a goddess—a 'serpent'—to aid in his grand conquest... There is one obstacle that must be surmounted no matter what."

The sudden advice stunned Hazumi on the spot.

The witch from the ancient kingdom remained composed the whole time.

"No need to worry, this is not something difficult. Lady Hazumi, your heart and soul already possesses the aptitude for it."

After that, they discussed their next move and overall strategy.

Shamiram would set off first for "a certain purpose."

Hal and Hazumi would only start moving after casting multiple layers of stealth magic. Riding Minadzuki, who had miniaturized again, they set off on a journey through the air.

However, they did not have a destination.

Their plan was to fly casually in the sky to hide for an hour or two.

"Senpai, are you still unable to trust her?"

"Well, I'd really like to trust her."

Hal replied to Hazumi, who was sitting in front. Naturally, by "her" they were referring to Shamiram.

"By saying that, you mean—"

"I... 'm not worried at all. I believe that Shamiram is a really good person."

The two of them were riding Minadzuki the serpentine dragon.

Sitting in front of Hal, Hazumi looked back on purpose, showing a smile of purity.

But right now, Haruga Haruomi was also the guardian of his adorable junior.

Once in a while, unpleasant as it may be, he had to give her the realistic view.

"Without clear evidence, it's not good to draw conclusions based on impressions."

Hal deliberately made himself sound cruel.

"We must prepare for the worst-case scenario at all times."

"Although it might not count as evidence, I think there is still a reason for believing her, because Minadzuki did not react towards her."

"Minadzuki?"

"Yes. Whenever anyone untrustworthy approaches me... She will instantly stay on alert. She is very smart."

"I see, so there's such a move huh."

Hal nodded indifferently without revealing that his heart had been melted by Hazumi's smile.

It was definitely quite like a girl to make decisions based on impressions.

Logically speaking, he ought to rebuke this sort of opinion. However, to bring up a "serpent," a supernatural being, as a reason, perhaps this could be what was extraordinary about Hazumi.

Hazumi was not only pure but also had down-to-earth intelligence...

"Oh?"

A smiling voice came from behind.

Hal turned his head back to see that the kimono-clad Hinokagutsuchi had materialized without his knowledge. Sitting on the miniature Minadzuki's back, she had her legs sticking up in the air.

"You are quite stubborn and cowardly, brat."

"I don't deny that, but can't you add cautious to that too? Say —"

Hal asked the former dragon queen who was casually appraising him.

"What's your opinion of her?"

"Hmm? Irrelevant. If she is aiding you sincerely, make good use of her. If she has ulterior motives, then use your jaws to crush her together with her trap. Brat, this is what it means to show a king's mettle."

"Thank you for your completely uninformative opinion."

Hazumi giggled after listening to Hal and Hinokagutsuchi's conversation. Then with a sudden realization, she asked, "Excuse me... The 'obstacle that must be surmounted no matter what' which Shamiram-san mentioned, how do I surmount it specifically?"

Supposing Hazumi wished to become the spokesperson for a goddess — a "serpent" — to aid in his grand conquest.

This was the prior assumption in her advice. Confused, Hazumi said, "Do I truly have the aptitude for that? It's not like I'm good at magic, so I really can't feel any aptitude in myself."

"Oh... About that."

"Hmph."

Seeing Hal nod, Hinokagutsuchi smiled with malevolence.

"It appears that the brat has deduced most of it."

"Come on, clearly you're the one who already knows everything."

Hazumi widened her eyes, very excited.

"Please do tell me! I wish to be of even more help to Senpai and all of us!"

"Hmm... Sorry, I won't tell you."

Of course, instructing her would not be hard. However—Hal shrugged.

Taking care of everything for her would not necessarily be a good thing, although he might feel a momentary sense of "superiority" as the instructor.

Conversely, it could also cause the one being taught to weaken in "comprehension ability."

Although Hal was young for someone in the workforce, he also possessed extraordinary abilities, hence, he decided to leave Hazumi to her own devices.

"Rather than having others tell you directly, it's better to figure things out on your own."

"I-I see."

"Yeah. Even more so for work and professional skills. Well, I think there's nothing to worry about."

Due to his protege looking very worried, Hal added the latter sentence.

In fact, he could have omitted the reassuring words, but there was no helping it. Hazumi was his adorable student.

"Despite her personality being like that, Shamiram-san seems to be a good judge of character. Shirasaka, you do have aptitude—or rather, I believe that your temperament is very suited to developing yourself in that direction."

"V-Very well."

Hazumi nodded resolutely. Feeling his heart and soul soothed by Hazumi's reaction, Hal then looked at Hinokagutsuchi.

Through the earlier conversation, Hal came to realize now that he thought back to it. The words casually spoken by the ancient beautiful witch seemed to be very profound—

"Sorry for suddenly changing the subject but I've got a question for you. I remember that pure-blooded dragons don't like to take human form, isn't that right?"

Pure-blooded dragons. Beings that were born as dragons from the start.

In contrast to them were the hybrid dragons. They were living creatures that were not dragons to begin with, humans for example, but guided by the path of the unorthodoxy, they had been reborn as dragons.

Currently, Hinokagutsuchi the former dragon king had materialized herself in the form of a prepubescent human girl.

"By taking this form... It means you're a hybrid, right?"

"Oh? Who knows."

"If it's not too much to ask, I hope you won't play dumb as usual."

"I am not playing dumb. I simply cannot remember."

Hinokagutsuchi haughtily tossed a casual reply at him.

She even puffed out her chest, looking very superior.

"Because it was truly too long ago. Well, I am not against telling you should I remember one day. Go ahead and wait patiently, but do not get your hopes up."

"I see..."

The cunning former dragon king had lived for who knew how many thousands of years.

Hinokagutsuchi smirked craftily, apparently finding Hal's question ludicrous. Hal fell into deep thought.

Shamiram had said this just now:

'It has been over a thousand year since I followed my master to the grave.'

'Unlike the Tyrannoi... such as my master or you, Lord Haruga, I find that these long years have been too protracted and too burdensome for a mortal like me.'

At this point, Hazumi suddenly spoke up, "Senpai, Minadzuki seems to be ready now!"

"Looks like it."

The three of them were currently riding on the back of Minadzuki the emerald serpentine dragon leviathan.

She suddenly released potent magical power from her entire body, stimulating the senses of Hal's group. The usage counter of pseudo-divinity had recovered.

Hal took out a pocket watch.

It was currently 6pm or so on August 18th.

Leviathans would recover their magical power during the night. Although one could not distinguish night and day within the ark, Minadzuki's biological clock(?) still sensed the presence of night.

Furthermore, the battle against Hannibal had ended at roughly 11pm on August 16th.

They had been locked inside here for forty-three hours—Almost two days.

"It's time to settle things with Solomon-senpai."

Hal focused his consciousness on his heart, i.e. heartmetal.

The Crimson Queen, which he had snatched back earlier, the gigantic body of a dragon king appeared out of thin air. Her body ablaze with intense flames, she arrived by Minadzuki's side. As though intending to fly alongside her, she glided at the same speed.

"We're lucky we didn't get attacked while waiting for Minadzuki to recover."

"It's all thanks to Shamiram-san's help!" answered Hazumi.

Hal had asked the beautiful witch to act separately as a "diversionary tactic."

He hoped she could buy time by drawing the attention of King Solomon and his subordinates during the one or two hours before night fell. Meanwhile, Hal and Hazumi would use stealth magic to cover their tracks until then —

"Also, it's thanks to stealing back the queen."

For the enemy, the Crimson Queen was also a trump card.

Hal now held the advantage in terms of combat strength... Theoretically speaking. However, the ark was the battlefield — The interior of King Solomon's legacy. The enemy still held the advantage of home field.

No matter what, Hal's group had finally managed to reach the endgame.

The target was their original destination — The control room. For this purpose, they ordered Minadzuki and the queen to fly faster.

Part 2

The ark was a legacy of the late King Solomon of the ancient Kingdom of Israel.

Hal had no idea specifically how large was the "sky" inside it. In any case, Hal's party finally reached the airspace that was the center of this sky.

It was their ultimate destination.

Shamiram had told them that *the ark's control room* was there.

"It's shaped like a ship..." Hazumi murmured.

She and Hal were still riding the miniaturized Minadzuki's back.

The red dragon—the Crimson Queen—was leading the emerald serpentine dragon. Meanwhile, Hinokagutsuchi had de-materialized and returned to the magic gun.

Unlike previous times, what awaited them ahead was not a sky island.

It was a giant rectilinear ship hovering in the air.

The ship was roughly a hundred meters from prow to aft with a width of thirty meters or so.

"This size feels similar to Noah's Ark."

The Old Testament of the Bible had mentioned the legendary ship.

Hal brought up the very famous name. In order to escape the deadly flood, Noah and his family—and all animals—had taken refuge on that ship.

The Ark's dimensions were given as "300 cubits in length, 50 cubits in width and 30 cubits in height."

There were many interpretations on the correct length of the "cubit" mentioned in the Bible.

However, according to the current prevailing view, "300 cubits x 50 cubits x 30 cubits" would basically match the size of the box-shaped ship before Hal and Hazumi's eyes...

The deck did featured neither a mast nor a cabin. It was all flat.

It looked like a ship but actually was not.

Shamiram had called it "the magic device for controlling Solomon's ark."

"As expected, it's not gonna be unguarded huh!"

With the Crimson Queen in the lead, Hal's party would reach the "ship" in about 200m.

At that moment, dragons—bronze statues shaped like them—surrounded the "ship."

These dragonoid sculptures spread their wings and started flying like living beasts.

They bore a great resemblance to lesser dragons in size and appearance. The motions of their necks, bodies and limbs were also the same as Raptors. These were no ordinary statues.

They were gargoyles granted temporary life by magic.

Deciding that Hal's party must be intercepted, the twelve gargoyles flew towards them!

"Senpai, let's have Minadzuki grow big!"

"Don't worry, it won't be necessary."

Hal and Hazumi were both riding Minadzuki's back.

Sitting in front as the rider in control, Hazumi had looked back and spoken nervously. Hal remained calm.

Minadzuki had shrank herself to a body length of five meters or so to serve as their flying mount.

It was not necessary to undo miniaturization yet. Despite lacking Asya's special skill of using wild instincts to detect danger from the enemy, Hal still knew.

The magical power released by the twelve gargoyles were not that strong.

"Even someone like Solomon-senpai won't be able to magically craft subordinates capable of matching leviathans. The queen is enough to take care of them."

Hal's past formidable foe, Pavel Galad, had used alchemy to create powerful minions.

However, King Solomon had remained within "human" boundaries during his lifetime. Hence, his magical power could not reach that level of potency.

One could surmise that he went to develop the techniques for synthesizing leviathans for the purpose of bridging this gap.

In front of the confident Hal, the Crimson Queen was the first to unleash fiery breath. The dragon king-class body discharged flames that swirled through the sky with a blast of scorching air.

The twelve gargoyles were completely incinerated by the flames into ash.

The entire process took no more than a few seconds. Engulfed in flames, the gargoyles did not even have enough time to struggle against the fire, vaporizing with a sizzle.

"Now that he has become a ghost, he should be much weaker than during his prime when he was still alive..."

Even if Hal chose a direct showdown, it was more than likely that he would not be stuck in a difficult battle.

Deduction gradually turned to certainty. Hal silently thought to himself, "hence—I expect Senpai to devise a surprising tactic to counterattack..."

In any case, Hal's party eliminated the obstructions and approached the "ship."

Just like the main ark that had descended upon the Hudson River, this control device was also a wooden ship.

Like satellites, the Crimson Queen and Minadzuki, who had returned to normal size, circled the wooden ship on high alert. Next, Hal and Hazumi finally stepped onto the wooden deck.

"Then let's begin."

Hal summoned his magic gun near the center of the deck.

Rather than shooting, his purpose was searching.

There were many secrets of Ruruk Soun hidden inside the "magic wand" of a gun...

Rapidly searching through the grimoire passed down by dragonkind since antiquity, he found a "usable incantation."

"This is the one."

Hal touched the magic gun and drew out magical power from his heart.

In the next instant, thirteen runes of Ruruk Soun appeared on the wooden ship's deck.

They signified "seize control." The act of snatching away the right to control a magical artifact or familiar, bringing it into one's possession —

This was the secret behind this spell.

King Solomon had used it repeatedly to steal the Crimson Queen.

It was time to give him a taste of his own medicine. However —

"This magic is taking effect abnormally slowly."

Hal had expected this to steal Solomon's ark in one go.

He frowned. The magic gun told him that he had currently seized only 30% control. The remaining 70% was still held by King Solomon.

However, the figure was gradually rising to 31% then 32%.

Why was it happening like this? Hal searched in puzzlement.

He instantly found the runes for "spell resistance," whose purpose was to block specific incantations. If blocking was impossible, it would reduce effectiveness as much as possible.

This was a secret technique of Ruruk Soun with magic defense as the goal.

"Did Solomon-senpai cast this magic on the control device in advance?"

A watertight defense to prevent others from imitating himself.

As expected of the great sorcerer of ancient times. Despite similar power levels, the other party still held a slight upper hand in strategy. But thanks to that, Hal learned a great spell.

Touching the magic gun again, he looked at the Crimson Queen.

Four runes appeared over the red dragon's head — "spell resistance."

Even if King Solomon tried another surprise attack, this spell should be able to protect the queen. Under unexpected circumstances, Hal learned a technique in magical combat.

"On further thought, this kind of strategic contest might be a first."

"Senpai, you are so amazing. Honestly — although this may sound weird — you are truly like a sorcerer," said Hazumi from next to the muttering Hal.

Truly like a sorcerer. Realizing the meaning behind these words, Hal could not help but smile wryly.

Indeed, every instance of SAURU magic that Haruga Haruomi had used so far was very low-key, somewhat different from how ordinary people would picture "Magic!"

However, the wisdom of Ruruk Soun was definitely not a field of study he wished to delve deep into.

Hal subconsciously said, "I don't really want to accumulate knowledge or experience in this area, that's all."

"Eh? Why is that? I believe it's a wonderful thing to be able to use magic with increasing skill."

"That isn't the whole of it, which is why I find it a nuisance."

It would probably take at least twenty minutes to seize 100% control of the ark, right?

While thinking "I wonder if Solomon-senpai might show up during this time?", Hal responded absent-mindedly to Hazumi... Then came to a sudden realization.

He had apparently made a slip of the tongue just now.

His words would expose *a certain secret* that he had kept concealed so far.

Furthermore, the listener was Shirasaka Hazumi—the girl who faithfully paid attention to Hal's every word, even taking notes on the side, never neglecting to study them—Had he been too careless in saying that just now...?

Hal could only hope that Hazumi had missed it.

Apprehensively, Hal examined her face.

"Excuse me, what did you mean by 'that isn't the whole of it'...?"

His hopes were dashed. Hazumi gazed at Hal, looking extremely worried.

Should he muddle through with a random excuse?

However, Orihime knew a long time ago. Luna Francois had also grown suspicious of the risks from wielding the power of dragonbane.

And Asya too—

Perhaps Hal's childhood friend might—

Making full use of her wild instincts and the miraculous powers of their inseparable bond, perhaps she might have noticed something was off, but had intentionally refrained from bringing it up. No, but it was very likely that she really had not noticed yet.

In any case, Hal sighed.

His Tyrannos level had risen to the point of being able to use the magic of Ruruk Soun.

Maybe it was time for him to confess the "bad news" to his circle, not just the good news...

"Actually," Hal prayed that his tone sounded as relaxed as possible, "it seems like I'll turn into a dragon if my power continues to grow."

Part 3

The man in black, Sophocles, had said the following to Hal before.

'By conquering water, sky and earth, successors to the power of dragonbane can become even stronger.'

'The more you increase your territories, the greater your power will grow, while at the same time, the closer you will get to becoming a dragon king.'

'In the past, the type of non-dragon creatures known as "hybrid" dragons — In truth, they were unexpectedly commonplace.'

Sophocles had calmly explained the rules of the dragonslaying game, the Road to Kingship. While explaining that, he was also telling Hal about the possibility of Tyrannoi turning into dragons.

The scene returned to the vast sky within Solomon's ark.

Standing on a wooden ship's deck, a place never in his wildest dreams would he ever expect himself to be, Hal told Hazumi the whole story.

Just as what Sophocles had explained for him previously.

"That being said, I've no idea how long it'd take for me to turn into a dragon."

Hal rolled his sleeve up to his elbow and presented his right arm to Hazumi.

The entire arm was giving off a glassy luster. The hard texture felt like metal.

Previously, Orihime had also noticed these "changes to the physical body."

Seeing Hazumi gasp, Hal shrugged and pulled his sleeve back down.

"Because I've been leveling up very successfully lately, I guess. I think it's time I start taking more care."

Acting as the confidant, Hazumi was dumbstruck, too stunned to take any notes.

It must have been quite a shock for her. However, ever since inheriting the dragonslaying rune Hal had suspected whether there might be risks, hence this news was nothing unexpected for him.

"Well, if you look at it from a different angle..."

Speaking on behalf of the dumbfounded Hazumi, Hal continued on his own.

This was because he found the silence inexplicably awkward. It felt very somber.

"This risk might not be that big after all. Think about it, I can still take human form after becoming a dragon. It's the same for Yukikaze, Hannibal and Hinokagutsuchi. To the point that it's hard to tell whether their true appearance is a dragon or a human."

"W-Well—"

Hazumi finally spoke. Her voice sounded far more uncertain than Hal's frivolous tone of voice.

"I believe... If you truly think that, Senpai, you wouldn't have kept this a secret for so long."

"....."

"Is there anything else you're hiding? Apart from turning into a dragon, is there anything else very serious that will happen!?"

Sure enough, Hazumi was very smart. Despite her inexperience with matters of the world, on a fundamental level, she was a very wise girl.

Having pointed out the crux of the matter straight away, she left Hal no choice but to surrender. If possible, he wanted to keep this secret to the very end—No.

That was not it. In fact, it was the opposite.

Hal was aware of the fragile parts of his own heart.

Very likely, he actually wanted to find someone to discuss this. Hence, that was why he was prepared to tell this young girl about his speculation while sighing...

"Hinokagutsuchi said earlier that she couldn't remember if she started out as a dragon or a human because it was really too long ago," Hal said calmly.

"Based on my deductions, it's more than likely she was originally human. Then as her dragon powers grew stronger, she lost her memories from that time. However, I don't know if it happened before or after she became a dragon king..."

"Sh-She lost her memory?"

Hazumi jumped. Hal shrugged and said, "Who knows? Maybe it's like how we naturally forget our childhood memories, they gradually forget the memories from when they were still human. You've probably forgotten everything from your days as a baby, right?"

"Y-Yes."

"That's the basic gist I'm getting."

For hybrid dragon kings (and Tyrannoi), their human phase would be equivalent to "infancy."

After all, they were superbeings that could live for hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of years. The mere decades of a human's life experience was nothing than a blink of the eye.

Hence, they would forget. They would naturally forget their time as a human.

Apart from that, their self-awareness as "a former human" would gradually fade away. Through the passage of time, their mental side would also change progressively.

From human to former human. Turning into an entity closer to dragonkind.

Human-like aspects would slowly deviate from one's original character, finally developing into a more monster-like personality.

Indeed. A personality as befitted a dragon king — the status belonging to dragonkind's sovereigns.

Hannibal's bold and unfettered ways, Princess Yukikaze's childishness and charisma, Hinokagutsuchi's haughtiness, perhaps these were the outcomes of such a transformation...

Hal explained his theory to Hazumi calmly.

From a long time ago, he had started secretly suspecting this possibility.

"Clearly my body is still a human's, but previously, Shamiram-san had called the Tyrannoi 'peers of dragonkind'."

"....."

"As a result, I think she's probably talking about the mental side of things. It wouldn't be weird for ordinary humans to go crazy after living for thousands of years, but I think what happens is that we lose our past and awareness as humans, living on through the years no matter what — as dragons."

"...B-But—"

Hazumi interrupted, finally able to squeeze out a voice and her thoughts.

"All this is all from your imagination, Senpai, isn't it?"

"Pretty much."

"Then it's also possible that reality is different from what you think!"

"But it *wouldn't make sense* otherwise. Based on all kinds of circumstantial evidence, I can be virtually certain that Hannibal and Princess Yukikaze are so-called hybrids... But you also know that they definitely see humanity as 'another race.'"

Hal recalled the way they spoke and behaved.

They should be humans to begin with, but Hannibal showed genuine curiosity in human culture, always treating humanity as another race. Yukikaze was similar.

Perhaps Haruga Haruomi would end up like that eventually.

"As I turn more and more into a dragon—"

Hal said quietly.

"Not only my body, but even my mind is affected... I might totally forget these past fifteen or sixteen years of my life. I'll end up not recognizing you, Asya, Juujouji, Luna and forget my relationship with everyone."

Indifferent to people in general, Hal did not actively cultivate social relationships.

For someone like him to lose all ties to friends and acquaintances, to begin a new life as part of the warrior race of dragonkind—

What a truly worrying blueprint of the future.

Sigh. Hal sighed lightly and shook his head.

Yet of all times, Hinokagutsuchi did not show up now. She did not say "on the contrary" to Hal... Did this imply that she was tactfully affirming Hal's speculation?

"C-Could it be that—"

Hazumi spoke in trepidation.

"You refrained from responding directly to a confession from someone as outstanding as Luna-san—It was because you were worried that you might turn into a dragon eventually and lose your memory?"

"Yeah... Maybe."

The two of them had finally built up a good relationship, yet he had to worry about something like this.

There would probably be many problems...

Now that Hazumi brought it up, Hal definitely felt that "this won't do" as well. Although he had not been aware of it, perhaps this was the sort of mindset that became a hindrance.

Hazumi continued to speak to Hal, who had fallen into deep thought.

Furthermore, it was an attack that blindsided him.

"Furthermore—I apologize if I misunderstood, but—Senpai and Nee-sama... There are signs that you didn't start going out despite harboring mutual affection for each other, sure enough, the reason is also—?"

"!?"

The fresh bomb dropping out of the blue left Hal at a loss how to react.

Due to his theory that "romantic relationships within the team would cause many problems," Hal was prepared to answer "of course not, that's definitely not the kind of relationship I have with Juujouji" —

In the end, under Hazumi's candid gaze, Hal found himself at a loss for words, whether to respond or to skirt the issue.

"Well, umm, how should I put it...?"

However, Hal did not have sufficient experience on this front to be able to speak fluently.

Panicking more and more, Hal desperately racked his brain on how to explain himself.

"I guess it might be impossible for me to deny that I hold certain special feelings for Juujouji, yeah. It is evident that the other person involved, Juujouji, might possibly... or rather, more than likely, holds feelings for me beyond what one would reserve for an ordinary male friend..."

"Uh, in other words... Both of you are aware of each other's feelings, isn't that right?"

"Yeah, something along those lines."

Hazumi had summarized the crux of the matter in a single sentence. Hal nodded stiffly.

In fact, they had "taken a small step forward" in progress, but Hal found it too embarrassing to talk to his junior about this sort of thing.

Furthermore, it was possible that Juujouji would want to keep it a secret from her cousin too.

Taking care not to say anything reckless, Hal finally turned to face Hazumi.

"Say, Shirasaka, when did you notice 'that kind of relationship' between Juujouji and me?"

"I think it was around the time before the summer vacation."

While Hal was thinking "Eh? She already noticed back then?" in surprise, Hazumi said softly, "I love both you and Nee-sama very much, which is why I am always watching you two... Then seeing you two together, I feel that there is a nice atmosphere between you."

"O-Oh—"

"It struck me that 'Nee-sama and Senpai are walking so close together.' I also sensed different vibes from the two of you together compared to back in early spring."

"I-I see."

Hal jumped in surprise. *So we were already acting "weird" all the way back then.*

But on further thought, Luna had named Orihime as her foremost rival after confessing to him. Weird rumors were also circulating in school...

Was Asya, given her extreme lack of feminine charm, the only one who had failed to notice?

Hal was frozen on the spot by embarrassment.

"So, Senpai... How will you handle your relationship with Nee-sama?"

Hazumi asked in a murmur.

For some reason, the emotions on her face were mixed with sorrow and worry.

"Will you start going out as an official couple—"

"....."

The directness of Hazumi's question left Hal unsure how to proceed.

'Am I allowed... to love you, Haruga-kun? Or is romance within the team forbidden?'

'O-Of course, you're allowed, Juujouji!'

Indeed. This conversation with Orihime remained a vivid memory.

However, suppose Orihime had spoken words that were more direct and specific at the time, such as what Luna had said to Hal, "Let's start by going out then give the future some serious thought, okay?"

Would he have been able to give an affirmative reply immediately?

Just now, when Hazumi had asked him why he had not responded directly to Luna's confession, the same doubt had surfaced in Hal's mind.

How much longer could Haruga Haruomi maintain his personality and self-awareness as a human?

"Well, of course I'm very glad that she likes me. But someone like me... Am I allowed to have that kind of relationship with a normal girl?"

Hal voiced his thoughts honestly.

"Although one shouldn't think too much during times like these, from the perspective of animal instincts and love theories, dashing straight to the finish might be the correct answer after all."

Of course, there also existed the kind of love that blazed intensely because time was running out.

However.

Unfortunately, being slightly over-rational, Hal would not do that. For better or worse, he had a tendency to think too much.

After Hal brought out his own view, Hazumi spoke to him firmly "as someone currently still human."

"B-But Senpai, you are shouldering the toughest job... I believe you are the one who needs a g-girlfriend or family to support you the most!"

"No no no."

In the process of speaking his mind, Hal had organized his thoughts and feelings.

"Putting stuff like romance or love as the first priority in life doesn't suit my personality after all. I am really grateful to Luna and Juujouji for their feelings, but it's best to leave our relationships at the stage of 'more than friends but less than lovers.'"

"Please don't suppress yourself like this—Nnnnn!"

"Shirasaka!?"

Hazumi suddenly fell on her knees, clutching her gut.

Her stomach seemed to be in great pain, twisting her adorable visage in suffering, causing her to break out in cold sweat. Hal recalled what had happened earlier.

Was it another stress-induced stomach cramp?

"What on earth is happening to you?"

"I don't know... But Senpai, I suddenly feel a stomachache as soon as I imagine you going out with Nee-sama and Luna-san."

"Don't be silly. Didn't I just say that I won't be going out with them?"

"Th-That's wrong! I believe you must make as many happy memories as possible, Senpai. Ever since you obtained a dragonslaying rune, you've been working or making preparations for the future, always busy beyond belief, getting little rest even at night..."

Before losing his awareness as a human, before turning into a dragon...

Hal instantly understood that Hazumi had omitted these final words out of consideration for his feelings.

Despite the sudden stomach pain tormenting her, she was still trying her best to be considerate for others. This kindness was truly in Hazumi's style. Hal could not help but feel touched.

"Fufufufu."

At that moment, a devil's voice, opposite to an angel's, could be heard.

Hinokagutsuchi finally materialized, cackling while she stared at the two of them.

"Worry not, Hazumi. Although this brat has pulled out a ton of nonsense logic... He is a man, all things considered. Furthermore, he is a man whose heart conceals an astounding amount of desires of the flesh."

She suddenly began to utter rubbish.

"This guy has already kissed the priestess whose name is Orihime."

"Ehhh!? Senpai, didn't you kiss Luna-san last time too—Right!?"

Hinokagutsuchi revealed the secret with a smug and knowing look, greatly shocking Hazumi.

Hal wanted to accuse her of invasion of privacy, but the self-styled devil was not finished.

"Well, simply stated, despite his eccentric and difficult personality, this guy still finds desires of the flesh impossible to resist."

"D-Desires of the flesh? Sorry, I don't know what that means..."

A term that could be designated R15 was making Hazumi tilt her head in puzzlement.

"Is it like a 'desire to eat meat'?"

"A bit off but not too far away. Your intuition is quite accurate. Please check the dictionary on your own later."

"Y-Yes!"

"Shirasaka, don't check that kind of term! Y-You, stop teaching her weird things!"

"This is nothing weird, brat. Know that it is a grave matter concerning your future."

Hinokagutsuchi smiled at the indignant Hal.

She seemed to have picked this timing to jump out and speak for the sake of causing trouble. Furthermore, the former dragon queen casually added, "I know not whether your theory is right or wrong, because I have already forgotten everything from when I was a Tyrannos, prior to becoming a dragon king."

"I knew it."

"Be that as it may... That little girl, Yukikaze, was definitely human once."

"As suspected."

"Now that I reflect upon what you said earlier in light of this—Fufufufu. Indeed, there are many points which make sense. Brat, I concede that focus of your argument is quite amusing. Allow a former queen such as I to offer a few words of praise to your discerning eye."

"Even if you praise me, it doesn't make me happy at all..."

Hal could not feel any joy from receiving extremely rare praise from the former dragon king.

Hinkagutsuchi laughed at the scowling Hal and turned to look at Hazumi.

"Hazumi. You wish for the brat to live slightly more 'normally' as a human, is that correct?"

"Th-That's exaggerating quite a bit... I simply wish for Senpai to live happier."

"The meaning is the same. You have noticed too that he is man who would brush normal life aside and immerse himself in work for the sake of pursuing his goals."

She seemed to be mocking Hal.

However, Hal was unable to muster a rebuttal.

Impressive as always, the former queen. She was unexpectedly sharp and had seen through Haruga Haruomi's true nature.

Indeed she was correct—Hal was someone who did not care about elements of happiness such as having droves of friends, self-indulgence after school, social networking on the internet, a clean and tidy home, fulfilling meals, sufficient sleeping time, family warmth, social gatherings, weekend dates...

etc. The focus with which he buried himself in work was enough to label him a workaholic.

Never stingy with effort that would make life easier for himself — That was Hal's motto.

But conversely, this could also be construed as doing whatever it takes to succeed.

"Yes. Senpai is always sloppy about his own personal matters, which is why I worry a lot..."

"Even for a man of this sort, so long as thoughts of lust persist in his heart —"

The young girl in the kimono laughed.

"There will still be temptation he would find difficult to resist. Like secretly kissing your cousin, for example."

She was imparting inappropriate knowledge to Hazumi who was worrying about Hal.

Her words were like Satan's whispers, tempting the pure-hearted Eve, who was living together with Adam in the Garden of Eden, making her aware of "wisdom and desire."

"W-What kind of temptation is it?"

"For example, if your cousin were to offer up her magnificent body and demand to spend a night of passion in his company."

"!?"

"Suppose this were not enough, then have that lass named Luna do the same."

"Luna-san too!?"

"By this point, if he is still grumbling this or that, Hazumi, you could simply join in and tempt the brat too."

"M-M-M-M-M-Me too!?"

"H-Hold on a sec, what are you trying to make Shirasaka do!?"

Hazumi was left dumbstruck by the series of outrageous statements, so Hal screamed on her behalf. Hinokagutsuchi puffed out her chest proudly and snickered.

"I feel that developments would take for an amusing turn next, which is why I wanted to guide her along the path of love."

"I knew it, you were planning nothing good!"

"It is not like you have nothing to gain from this, so just shut up."

"Don't tell me to shut up! Stop putting strange ideas into the angelic Shirasaka's head!"

He was the only one who could protect his junior's pure and innocent soul.

Filled with righteous fury, Hal protested against the young girl who was the devil incarnate. He also asked Hazumi, "By the way, Shirasaka, you don't think of me like that, right?"

"Huh? Like what?"

Hazumi was taken aback for a moment. Hal asked more explicitly, "As a romantic prospect, someone to develop a man-woman relationship with."

"Uh, umm, well... Of course I love you very much, Senpai. I wish to maintain a good relationship with you forever, and sometimes I think

'wouldn't it be wonderful if only I had an older brother like Senpai?' B-But, I've never thought about going out with you or getting married..."

As expected, Hazumi denied it.

Hal nodded. Indeed, their relationship ought to remain platonic, starting as senior and junior then finishing as a pseudo-sibling relationship.

...However.

He would be overjoyed if Hazumi really thought of him as a potential partner.

Ignoring Hal, Hinokagutsuchi asked the girl, "I see. So you have never thought about it before? Then what about now?"

"Huh?"

"Hazumi. After the battle against the Red Flame Emperor... known nowadays as 'Hannibal,' you have been experiencing frequent stomachaches. Every time, you were thinking about this brat, weren't you?"

"Y-Yes. I was thinking about Senpai and Nee-sama."

"Fufufufu. The pure little lass has finally awakened her jealousy? Well, the embers of carnal desire do get lit by the bond of unorthodoxy linking her to the palm and heartmetal of the man she admires..."

Hinokagutsuchi was speaking as though Hazumi was harboring affections for Hal.

Hazumi also sneaked a glance at Hal before lowering her head immediately. It seemed as though she was too embarrassed to show her face to anyone, unable to organize her thoughts and feelings.

What the heck? Hal was thrown into confusion.

This atmosphere makes it almost like Shirasaka actually likes me in that way —

"By the way, brat."

Hinokagutsuchi suddenly spoke to the confounded Hal.

"Suppose your assumptions are correct, it would not be strange for your mind to show symptoms of 'losing one's memories and self-awareness as a human,' would it? Allow me to help you confirm."

A smile was hanging on the young girl's face.

"Fufufufu. You have known that girl named Asya for many years, have you not? When and where did you first meet her? What were you two doing together at the time?"

"Now that's a really sudden question from you."

The subject had changed without warning. Hal could not help but grumble.

However, this turned out to be perfect for dispelling the awkward mood between him and Hazumi.

"I remember it was eleven years ago when we were five. The two of us... were lost in a certain European country, so we bought either a burger or a hotdog to share. Back then, it was either Asya or me who paid, I guess?"

Hal answered fluently.

He remembered very clearly, so it took no effort to recall.

"Anyway, I don't think there's any problem with my mind."

"Apparently so. It would be very entertaining if you turned into a fool as quickly as possible."

Hal and Hinokagutsuchi bickered.

Listening from the side, Hazumi tilted her head slightly in puzzlement, perhaps unable to keep up with the two who had dispelled all sense of gravity from the situation.

Just as Hal was about to explain to Hazumi—

The silhouettes of seventy-two dragons suddenly appeared in the sky over their location of the wooden ship's deck. Naturally, they were the serpent souls.

Ahhh....

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

The serpent souls began to sing a mournful melody.

King Solomon had finally arrived at the "climax."

Part 4

Seeing the final opponent's arrival, Hal motioned to Hazumi with his eyes.

Stop the conversation, it was time for the final showdown—Hazumi instantly nodded to acknowledge Hal's message.

They were standing on the device used to control King Solomon's ark.

Hazumi's partner, Minadzuki, was flying around the ark's control device on guard.

In an adorable voice, Hazumi called out to the emerald serpentine dragon leviathan.

"Minadzuki, please!"

Minadzuki flew to a spot roughly ten meters over Hal and Hazumi.

She craned her neck like a poisonous snake on a hunt, glaring at the sky afar.

The seventy-two serpent souls serving King Solomon were flying in a flock over there, roughly two or three hundred meters higher in altitude.

The serpent souls were not flying in uniform formation.

Scattered all over the place, they kept tracing out elliptical trails in the air, circling repeatedly.

The serpent souls always took this action when supporting King Solomon. Not to be outdone, Hal issued orders to his minion.

"Come over here, queen. Come to our side."

He was speaking to the Crimson Queen on alert near the wooden ship.

The red dragon king descended next to Hal and Hazumi, on the wooden ship's deck. The ship was massive with a length reaching a hundred meters, so having a dragon land on it was no problem at all.

Hinokagutsuchi swiftly disappeared, returning to inside the magic gun.

Now they were fully prepared for the incoming battle. Meanwhile, King Solomon's faction suddenly did something unprecedented.

'...Impressive as ever, the one who obtained the key to my legacy.'

A deep and authoritative male voice was heard from the sky.

It sounded like thunder. However, the vast blue sky inside King Solomon's barrier did not have a single cloud.

'...O bow user, I never expected you to be such a thorn in my side.'

"In other words, you're Solomon-senpai?"

'...Indeed.'

Even this brief answer was deep and solemn, resounding across the entire blue sky.

Although Solomon himself could not be seen, this was still quite an elaborately staged performance.

If this had been taking place in the world of Japanese animation, a super famous voice actor would most likely be hired to portray his wonderful voice. In any case, it was very deep. Hal felt that the voice acting fee would be very expensive.

"I-It's like God."

Unlike her senior who was entertaining frivolous thoughts, Hazumi expressed sincere admiration from the heart.

In contrast, Hal nodded the same as usual.

"Hmm. I think I know where this performance comes from. In the Old Testament of the Bible, there were prophets who could hear the voice of the one true God in heaven. Before the arrival of Jesus Christ, it always played out this way. There are many other versions too."

He began to explain, seeming unexpectedly laid back.

"Speaking of which, the Old Testament of the Bible recorded the story of the Jew's ancestors—the people ruled by Solomon-senpai's ancient kingdom of Israel. In terms of ethnic lineage, they are part of the Semitic peoples, although the sky gods appearing in Semitic myths are actually the origin of the 'God' in the Bible's Old Testament. Treated as a demon in the Bible, Baal was actually a sky god of the Semites but not the Jews, and the chief god in

the pantheon to boot. You can actually find traces of ancient religions like this all over the Old and New Testaments of the Bible."

"Y-Yes."

Hazumi nodded but she was clearly lost.

She was probably unable to understand why Hal could be this calm. In contrast to Hazumi, the amazing voice from the sky sounded a bit delighted.

'...Tyrannos of a later era, you are speaking of things outside my knowledge, are you not? That is quite calm and composed of you.'

"I'm good, thanks. Because your background is the same as mine, Senpai... Someone halfway in between, more than human but not yet a dragon king. Compared to the likes of Hannibal, facing you is a bit easier."

Despite sounding relaxed, Hal did not lower his guard at all, of course.

This was a showdown between two people of similar power. A moment's carelessness would be taken advantage of. However, just as Hal said, he was having an easier time on a mental level.

This was thanks to the experience he had accumulated over numerous intense battles—A fact that truly did not bring him any joy now that it was brought up.

Regardless, as a bookworm diametrically opposed to warrior races, Hal was currently facing off against this voice in the sky.

"I guess your goal is that tired cliché, you're going to steal my body, right?"

'...You are correct. If a Tyrannos capable of finding my legacy were to appear, I would steal his body and dragonslaying power to allow me to rebuild my kingdom... That is my plan.'

As expected. Hal shrugged.

That being said, dismissing it as a tired cliché was probably because Hal lived in the modern age. For a human living in the pre-Christian era, King Solomon's resurrection plan was definitely a pioneering notion beyond its time.

He said, '...Be that as it may, you have been no pushover. I have been forced to take many great pains.'

"That's the way it is. Those lower than me in level won't be able to get here, but if your opponent was a dragon king instead, Senpai, you'd be the one in trouble. By the way—"

Hal changed the subject.

"I am actually a little optimistic."

'...Oh? Optimistic about what?'

"The fact that you're coming out directly and even conversing with me— Doesn't that imply that you've finally used up all your sneak attacks?"

'.....'

"Cloak and daggers are pretty much my thing, but I'm starting to miss the earth, so I'd like a frontal showdown to bring this incident to a close."

'...Then keep your eyes peeled, bow user.'

King Solomon's ghost spoke to Hal in a cheerful voice.

'...This is the final ploy I have devised for the sake of defeating you. Fufufufu... O seal of purity and justice discovered from the secret annals of the sea of stars.'

"Huh!?"

"Senpai, what is that!?"

Hal and Hazumi reacted with alarm and shock.

Responding to King Solomon's summon, a brightly shining pentagram appeared in the sky. Indeed. Black flames were leaving trails in the air to trace out a giant seal.

For those knowledgeable in magic in the modern day, *that pentagram* would be considered a familiar symbol.

'...Heed my call and let the archdemon descend upon the world. I, King Solomon, hereby pray for the arrival of a new servant. Gods—I implore you to listen to my request!'

Before the two modern humans' eyes, the pentagram changed into a "∞" shape.

Then it transformed into the body of a gigantic magic beast. It was a dragon—identical in appearance to the Crimson Queen too.

However, the new queen and the flames shrouding her body were black, in contrast to the red dragon king.

The color of her body was akin to the "blackness" of black lotus. The surrounding flames were also pitch black. If one had to give her name, it would probably be the "False Black Queen."

"I didn't expect such a move... Now that's my Solomon-senpai."

Feeling impressed, Hal muttered to himself.

"After all, he's the originator who came up with the technique of leviathan synthesis. Also, he not only created a 'serpent' suddenly—but even copied my queen too!"

Eloim Essaim was a magic incantation only privy to those in the know.

The false queen, summoned by this sacred incantation, roared ferociously.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

The atmosphere shook as a result. The power was no less than the Crimson Queen's.

Sensing the flow of magic, Hal could see the serpent souls flying far above in the air currently offering magical power to serve as the false queen's energy source.

The magical power rivaled that of the Crimson Queen that was connected to Hal's heart.

'...Bow user, you are correct.'

After roaring loudly, the false queen said to Hal, 'Now that it has reached this juncture, victory will go to whichever of us proves to be superior. Let us settle this!'

King Solomon's magnificent voice came out of the black dragon's mouth.

For the sake of defeating Hal's faction in a direct confrontation, he had possessed the ancient leviathan he created himself, to face off against Hal and the queen.

"Senpai, that dragon looks really strong..."

"Yeah. But she probably can't last for too long. Didn't our queen collapse pretty quickly last time?"

Hal reassured the worried Hazumi.

That dragon was ultimately just a replica. Its specs could not possibly be higher than the real thing. However, it would probably take twenty or thirty minutes before she collapsed.

Not long but not short either. It was also possible to end the battle within this duration.

"So pitting trump cards against each other would be the wise choice huh..."

The False Black Queen began to descend from the sky above.

Naturally, she was moving towards the wooden ship where Hal and Hazumi were. Her movement did not appear fast because they were some distance away, but in terms of actual speed, she was probably moving faster than a hundred kilometers per hour.

The false queen arrived within the blink of an eye. Hal aimed his magic gun at her.

At the same time, the Crimson Queen also summoned the Bow to her hand.

It was a crimson longbow — the weapon manifested from the Rune of the Bow. However, she had yet to call forth the all important *arrow*.

Hal issued orders, "Shirasaka, use pseudo-divinity!"

"Yes! Minadzuki, please!"

The bond of the covenant established by the rune allowed them to communicate through thoughts.

Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh —

Hearing Hazumi's wish, the emerald serpentine dragon cried out sonorously. Using the pseudo-divinity of Wind, she summoned thunderclouds in the sky.

Tearing through the sky, a bolt of lightning descended into the Crimson Queen's outstretched right hand.

Holding the crimson bow in her left, the Crimson Queen formed the lightning in her empty right hand into "an arrow of electricity," turning it into the queen's weapon.

The red dragon king placed the arrow onto the bow and fired.

Naturally, the target was the False Black Queen. Hal also pulled the trigger of his magic gun at the same time. In the next instant, the arrow of lightning shot by the Crimson Queen became enveloped by nine runes of Ruruk Soun.

Hal had imbued the arrow with the power of exorcism — the magical power of "purification of evil spirits."

This was the "goddess power" that Shamiram had bestowed upon the magic gun earlier.

"Counting on you!"

Imbued with the spiritual power of exorcism, the arrow flew forward to intercept the approaching false queen.

Hal watched with anticipation. After using this arrow to damage King Solomon's spirit body, he would then have the Crimson Queen swing the Twin Katana to seize victory.

Seeing the arrow arrive, the false queen —

'...O sacred shield!'

King Solomon's voice recited a defensive incantation.

In the next instant, a gigantic cross, rivaling a dragon's body in size, suddenly manifested in front of the false queen, serving as a shield to block the arrow of exorcism.

This alone would not have surprised Hal. It was a very common type of defensive magic.

However, chained to the cross was the massive body of a pteranodon.

It was Ashkelon. Not only that, but the beautiful witch from the ancient kingdom was also tied to Ashkelon's throat by a smaller chain. A beautiful captive.

Her head hanging, eyes tightly shut, she seemed unconscious.

"Shamiram-san!?"

Hal cried out in surprise.

At the same time, he subconsciously redirected the arrow.

Responding to Hal's thoughts, the arrow of exorcism deviated greatly from its trajectory. Just before striking Ashkelon and the cross, it changed direction —

It flew up into the sky.

...Had he contemplated calmly, Hal would have known.

Shamiram hoped to disappear from this world, so she did not mind getting caught in the fray of battle.

Since there was no way to rule out the possibility of her betrayal, naturally, Hal could have made the cruel choice of "piercing her together with the target."

He could have come up with a number of "smarter options."

However, Haruga Haruomi was not a member of a warrior race. None of these options was a choice he could make in desperation. More importantly, he did not want to do so. However, he paid a heavy price for it.

'...This is quite a irrevocable mistake, bow user!'

The false queen roared with King Solomon's voice.

A golden ring appeared on her pitch-black right hand. With a diameter of seven meters, it was the Rune of the Ring manifested as a weapon.

An unpleasant and dissonant noise erupted in the air next.

The golden ring emitted a sound of

"nyyyaaaarrllaaaaathooooooooottt.....@@x◆□◎△÷=∗¥ ! "

This evil sound was targetting Hal and the Crimson Queen.

"Warghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Hal could clearly feel the excessively abnormal noise invading his brain through his ears.

His brain stem was boiling. His innards felt stirred and uncomfortable with a rising wave of nausea surging up his throat, making him want to abandon all human thought, giving himself up to relentless screaming.

However, Hal still noticed. This was a technique of assured annihilation.

Nine runes of Ruruk Soun had appeared over the false queen's head.

The arrangement signified "I play the sound of the star of aggravation to disorient sentient minds" —

Furthermore, the false queen, i.e. Solomon, did not stop attacking. Using the golden ring as a frisbee, she tossed it out to strike the Crimson Queen.

The queen's giant body was sent flying by this attack.

Combined with the physical and mental damage caused by the weird noise, the queen could not stand up again, simply lying limp on the wooden ship's deck. The same went for Hal.

Feeling his knees go weak, he sprawled on the ground.

"Ughhhhh..."

"Senpai!"

Hal could only groan.

Hazumi hastily rushed over to Hal's side but stopped halfway.

This was because the False Black Queen was descending from the sky, approaching the wooden ship. Hazumi was the only one left who could attack.

Hazumi glanced at Hal helplessly then immediately looked up.

Facing the approaching false queen squarely, she prepared to fulfill her duty, even though her adorable face was tense from worry.

Sure enough, that was the kind of girl she was.

Thinking hazily amid the chaos in his mind, Hal looked at the magic gun in his right.

Despite his current sorry state, he still had the strength to pull the trigger. Should he exhaust the remainder of his meager power to aid Hazumi...? No. Hal deliberately refrained from doing so.

Instead, he spoke in a barely audible voice.

"Can I ask you to pass a message for me...?"

The damage from the weird noise had rendered Hal barely capable of moving his lips.

However, his intent evidently reached his target. The presence of the self-styled devil and guardian vanished from inside the magic gun.

Part 5

"Hu... Hwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Red Hannibal was locked in a gray space.

Lying on the ground, he opened his mouth wide to let loose a yawn, tears welling in his eyes.

"These guys are too inconsiderate... I have napped for so long, the boredom is killing me."

Literally bored to tears. He had nothing to do at all.

From the bottom of his heart, Hannibal was thinking, *wasn't it time for interrogation or torture?*

Also, "these guys" referred to the one who had captured Hannibal, of course.

If these guys showed themselves, Hannibal intended to complain right off the bat.

A prison consisting of absolutely tasteless gray extending to infinity was far too sloppy. Put in a little effort and make serious preparations.

However, not a single person appeared.

"Could the intention be for me to go insane and die of boredom?"

Hannibal began to ponder "hmm..."

He had survived all kinds of crises but "boredom" was the one thing he absolutely had no idea how to deal with.

He enjoyed killing time doing nothing. Napping was nice too.

However, in those cases, he had to ride the wind and float in the air with white clouds as his pillows and the blue sky as his bed.

Spending time in this gray space without nothing to do did not suit his interests.

"...In that case, it is time to say goodbye—Now then."

What was the situation outside the prison like?

Acting with caution more like a warrior than a dragon king, Hannibal wanted information.

Bold and unencumbered was more his style, but he was unable to transform into a dragon for the near term. Gathering detailed information was necessary once in a while, but—

"It might be a different kind of fun to make some rounds in this form and see how far I can get."

Struck by a sudden whim, he stuck out his tongue and licked his lower lip.

Hannibal's original plan was to wait until his magical power and stamina had recovered to the point of allowing him to transform into a dragon before taking action.

But on further thought, trying to escape while using a human body was clearly much more interesting. A challenge to see how far he could go in his current state was not a bad idea either.

He sat up.

In that instant, he sensed a familiar presence, so he spoke, "Greetings, Crimson Queen. It is wonderful to see you in good health."

"I am simply not completely dead. There is no good health to speak of."

The girl dressed in red silently appeared next to the yawning Hannibal. It was the human form belonging to the dragon king once known as the Crimson Queen.

Speaking in sarcastic tones as usual, the queen grinned.

"However, there is a bunch of fellows causing a ruckus outside."

"Oh? How enviable. Is that why this prison has been so lax in security, even allowing you to find this place so easily? In that case—"

Hannibal smiled with satisfaction.

"Queen, why have you come to see me?"

"Merely on a whim. I know that you enjoy crowds, hence if I were to inform you of the situation outside... You will surely go on a rampage of your own. Then all I need to do afterwards is take advantage of that."

"Hahahaha!"

Hearing his old acquaintance's self-centered reasons, Hannibal laughed heartily.

Hinokagutsuchi's tongue remained harsh as ever even after her death. Furthermore, her knowledge of the strongest dragon king Hannibal's personality remained impeccable.

"Well, apart from that, I am also bringing a message from the brat who inherited my bow."

The former queen revealed a malevolent expression and added.

"A temporary alliance until we get out of here, how about it?"

"Indeed... It is a rare festival and it would be quite boring to leave me alone here. Let me join in despite the tardy arrival."

He nodded firmly then whispered, "How is the situation outside? From what I can see, the Tyrannoi of the Bow and the Ring... are evenly matched in power, though the Ring's side holds a slight upper hand in strategy."

"That is the long and short of it. The bow brat has just been checked, but —"

The queen shrugged in the form of a young human.

"He has hidden an up his sleeve too. The decisive battle only begins now."

A melee battle finally unfolded in the air.

The False Black Queen and the emerald serpentine dragon Minadzuki were locked in a struggle.

However, the false queen was holding the upper hand. One could tell at a glance, because the gigantic black body remained motionless in the air, confident and composed, barely moving from her position at all.

On the other hand, Minadzuki was dashing this way and that, trying to find an opening.

As Hazumi's partner, the serpentine dragon possessed a long and slender body like a snake's. Slithering her body, she flew back and forth, searching for opportunities to bite her enemy.

Minadzuki widened her jaws and instantly flew up to the false queen. Her movements were as fast as lightning.

However, the imperishable protection surrounding the false queen defended against the attack.

In contrast, Minadzuki did not have imperishable protection on her, because Hal the provider was collapsed on the ground in a delirious state.

Ravaged by the bizarre noise, his body remained immobilized.

However, his thoughts were gradually recovering in clarity.

Hal tried to get a grasp on the situation.

Hazumi was up ahead, not too far away, watching the aerial battle with worry. She did not glance back at Hal at all.

But that was the correct thing to do. To look away and worry about others in such an emergency would be hugely problematic.

At this very moment, Shirasaka Hazumi must focus wholeheartedly on the battle.

Meanwhile, the false queen was facing off against Minadzuki.

Possessed by King Solomon, the false queen's defenses were solid as rock due to imperishable protection.

No matter how Minadzuki bit ferociously, attacking bravely with her teeth, the pearly light always deflected her effortlessly. Then the unscathed false queen would use her gigantic body of a dragon to attack the emerald serpentine dragon.

Using her five-clawed hands to attack Minadzuki, her talons ripped through her body.

Using her muscular arms to seize Minadzuki's body, she executed a bear hug. It was almost like a sumo wrestler using a *sabaori* move on an opponent.

Not only that, but the black dragon was also biting Minadzuki.

Minadzuki would scream with every inflicted injury.

Ahh!

Ahh!

"I'm so sorry, Minadzuki! But please, try harder...!"

Hazumi desperately cheered for Minadzuki.

There should be one more use of pseudo-divinity, but it did not look like she was going to use it yet.

She was biding her time—No, most likely, she lacked the resolve. In the event that she used her last chance but did not succeed...

Were Asya here, she would focus her mind and heart on a single gamble.

She would commit her determination and put everything on the line.

However, Hazumi was unable to make such a decision. Her inborn personality and lack of battle experience caused her to hesitate.

Sprawled on the ground, Hal watched over his protege in a crisis.

He did not have the strength to stand up, but if it was just pulling the trigger of his magic gun... No.

Hal mustered every last ounce of strength and turned his body around. He was now lying flat on his back instead of sprawling. This gave him a more expansive view.

He muttered to himself, "So the ring is still unscathed huh..."

The false queen and Minadzuki were dogfighting in the air.

Behind them, the golden ring was hovering in midair.

'nyyyaaaarrrllaaaaaathooooooooottt.....@@x◆□◎△+=*¥
.....nyyyaaaarrrllaaaaaathooooooooottt.....@@x◆□◎△+=*¥.....'

The ring continued to emit weird noise from its technique of assured annihilation.

The volume was not as deafening as in the beginning. Instead, it was at a softer volume as though reciting a cursed incantation nonstop. Even now, this sound continued to torment Hal's body and mind.

"The Rune of the Ring... has mostly attacks for assaulting the mind or depriving the target's freedom..."

He remembered.

In ancient Europe, the ring also symbolized "restriction" and "obedience." It was a kind of curse and magical tool.

One interpretation of wedding bands and similar items as proof of restricted social status stemmed from such symbolism.

Perhaps that was the distant origin of the Rune of the Ring.

"Anyway, looks like there's no choice but to get rid of that thing..."

At that moment, a change occurred in the aerial battle.

The false queen picked up a new weapon in her hand — The gigantic cross.

It was what King Solomon had summoned earlier to use as a shield against Hal's arrow of exorcism. The gigantic pteranodon, Ashkelon, was still bound to it...

After that, the cross had remained hovering in the air.

Holding it, the false queen used a dragon's arm strength to execute a mighty swing, striking the nearby Minadzuki squarely in the head with a massive thud.

The cross was made of wood, so it immediately shattered into fragments.

Tied to the cross, her restraints now shattered, Ashkelon began to fall.

Like a baseball struck by a bat, Minadzuki's giant body flew back as well. However, even after seeing the situation, Hazumi did not cry out her partner's name first.

"Shamiram-san!"

Indeed. The beautiful witch from the ancient kingdom was still tied to Ashkelon's throat.

Thrown into the air, her delicate body fell.

Furthermore, this was a world consisting of scattered sky islands without any ground beneath. Shamiram's body kept falling like that.

Continuing to fall, the beautiful witch and Ashkelon disappeared from Hal and Hazumi's sight.

"Minadzuki! Hurry and save Shami —"

Hazumi closed her mouth mid-sentence.

She must have realized it was too late. Furthermore, to turn her back to the false queen at this time and leave the battlefield would not be possible.

Because she and Minadzuki were the only ones remaining who could still fight properly —

Meanwhile, Hal grew increasingly unsure whether to pull his magic gun's trigger or not. He could add auto-homing magic to the bullet, allowing it to track down Shamiram and Ashkelon's whereabouts.

However, in the next instant, Hal heard a whisper.

(Lord Haruga...)

"Eh? Shimiram-san, where are you now?"

He could hear but not see her. Shamiram seemed to be using magic to send her voice to his ear.

(I have fallen on an island... Or rather, crashed into one. As a result, I did not fall into the abyss of hell.)

"That's great to hear. We'll go pick you up once the battle is over."

(Oh, no need for that. You do not need to take the trouble. I will head over to converge with you two once I make myself presentable.)

"Presentable...?"

(Yes. After all, I did fall from quite a great height. My skull has cracked open and my guts have burst out of my abdomen. Little of my prided beauty remains intact and my limbs have been bent in bizarre angles. As for my right arm, everything beyond the elbow is—)

"I get the picture. I look forward to your swift return."

Despite her condition, she sounded rather cheerful and energetic.

As expected of the dead, I guess? Or perhaps, he should praise Solomon's curse for the fact that Shamiram still failed to pass on despite suffering such grave injuries?

(My apologies. I only ended up like this because I was captured by the master when flying around as a diversion.)

"Please don't let it bother you. I was the one who asked you to help in the first place."

Hal himself was still immobilized but his discomfort had lessened somewhat.

As though chatting in leisure, he said, "I'm relieved now. It looks like you're in unexpectedly good health(?)... But if that's the case, couldn't you have used magic to struggle free before you got attacked?"

(Indeed that is so. My reason for not doing so is most likely identical to yours, Lord Haruga.)

Shamiram seemed to have noticed that Hal had held back.

(Lady Hazumi is a good girl as expected. Just as we have hoped—She is finally approaching the time of her awakening.)

"...For real?"

Hal looked at his protege again.

There was a pulsation of what seemed to be spiritual energy from Hazumi's petite back as a faint green glow slowly rose. Unmistakable. It was the phenomenon of magical power leaking out.

Like Hal, witches also used their hearts as their source of magical power.

Hazumi was currently drawing out magical power from her heart, beyond what her body could contain.

"Sorry... I must stop you no matter what."

Hazumi stared resolutely at the "enemy" and spoke solemnly.

She was standing on the deck near the wooden ship's prow. The target she was looking up towards from there was, of course, the False Black Queen.

Dominating the sky battlefield was the false black dragon.

This was the enemy that had caused Minadzuki suffering and sent Ashkelon and the beautiful witch Shamiram to their graves.

However, the false queen—or more precisely, King Solomon who had possessed her—did not seem to hear Hazumi's declaration. With Hazumi's words falling on deaf ears, the false queen looked down upon the world contemptuously in leisure.

The Crimson Queen and Haruomi-senpai were overpowered by the Ring, immobilized.

Her partner Minadzuki was battered all over.

She could not keep relying on others. She must depend on *herself*.

Hazumi took a deep breath.

What a nostalgic feeling—In the past, when Tokyo New Town had her as its only witch, Hazumi always headed out to the battlefield alone.

But back then, her opponents were primarily Raptors.

As long as she had Minadzuki's power, she could not possibly lose. All she had to do was issue orders casually and her partner would take care of the rest.

After gaining comrades, she had always listened to the commands of the older witches and Haruomi-senpai.

But now it was different. The enemy was King Solomon the great sorcerer and the false queen. An enemy that she had no chance of defeating even if she mustered her full strength. But even so, she still had to confront—

"I will work my hardest, so Minadzuki, you too... Please!"

Not simply a sincere prayer, this wish was also fueled by burning determination.

Its foundation was blazing wrath and firm willpower.

This was wrath born out of seeing injury done to one's loved one and someone who had treated her with kindness. It was unshakable willpower, determined to rely on no one but herself no matter what—

Just as these emotions surged from the depths of her heart...

Extremely potent magical power exploded from Hazumi's heart, so great the quantity that it was beyond her body's capacity to contain. Turning into a faint green glow, the magical power leaked out of the body.

She was experiencing this for the first time. In that very instant, she realized.

"Oh—"

She disliked conflict and was not good at magic.

This notion had often led to her stagnation in controlling her "serpent" in battle... However, it no longer applied to her as she was now. Her firm willpower, to "do it herself" no matter what, forbade her from faltering. Perhaps this was the reason.

The magical power filling up her entire body felt lighter and more agile than ever before. She was able to control it freely as she wished.

Next, all she needed to do was what Hinokagutsuchi had instructed, to offer sincere prayer to the partner possessing goddess power—despite being an imitation—

"To protect us... Use this power, Minadzuki."

With her hands clasped before her chest, Hazumi whispered quietly.

At that moment, the false queen happened to attack Minadzuki. Flying at Minadzuki, she was about to rip the emerald body to shreds with the sharp claws on her hands.

She had not noticed the change in Hazumi at all.

...That was why things were progressing so well. Suddenly, a whirlwind blowing from Minadzuki's entire body struck the false queen head on.

Next, nine runes of Ruruk Soun appeared over the gentle serpentine dragon's head.

They signified "purification of evil spirits"—The power of exorcism that Hal had used just now. Enveloped by the whirlwind imbued with the spiritual power of exorcism, the false queen screamed loudly.

'...Ohhh!?'

This pained shout was, of course, King Solomon's magnificent voice.



After Hazumi and Minadzuki had dealt King Solomon a devastating blow using "purification of evil spirits"...

The false queen toppled backwards. Even so, instead of crashing down, she barely continued to fly, distancing herself from Minadzuki unsteadily.

Hal was certain she was trying to escape from follow up attacks.

The ring's power still restrained him, but in that instant, Hal pulled the magic gun's trigger.

The gun's muzzle shot out thirty bullets of red light in full auto mode. Every bullet was imbued with the magic of auto-homing, each tracing out a curved trajectory in the air, heading towards the false queen—

All met their mark without fail.

'...Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?!'

King Solomon screamed again. It looked like he had suffered substantial damage this time.

The false queen's giant body finally began to fall. Lying on the ground, Hal praised Hazumi from his heart after firing his magic gun.

"You're so amazing, Shirasaka... You really did it with your own strength."

In the end, what Hazumi lacked was probably the willpower "to rely on herself no matter what."

That was what Hal thought. In fact, until now, all early signs of Hazumi's awakening had mostly occurred when she took action on her own initiative.

Hence, Hal had refrained from helping out this time.

However, this was also a decision that he had made under the prior condition that he must not recklessly use up his last hope — the magic gun's thirty bullets.

Hence, he had not chosen to wait and see in the hot-blooded shounen battle manga fashion of putting faith in "Hazumi will definitely be able to do it!"

"I guess this outcome is acceptable, although it was close as hell..."

(This was also thanks to Lady Hazumi being an honest and forthright young lady. Lord Haruga, you are truly fortunate to have such a fine lady in love with you —)

"No truer words."

That part about being in love was a misunderstanding... But Hal agreed that he was lucky indeed.

At that moment, ten-odd meters away from Hal, the junior who had just accomplished a great feat suddenly cried out "Ahhh!", stunned on the spot.

Halting her fall into the depths of hell, the false queen recovered.

"Was it not enough...? Queen!"

Saying that, Hal clicked his tongue.

The Crimson Queen still could not move. Like Hal, she had suffered from the Ring's technique of assured annihilation and was lying on the wooden ship's deck. Hazumi had also used up her two counts of pseudo-divinity.

They had nothing left to oppose the false queen and Solomon.

"Hahahahaha! Do not forget my presence!"

At that moment, Hal heard dragon king Hannibal's voice for the first time in a while.

He focused his eyes and saw a well-built man flying lightly in the air. With his red coat billowing in the wind behind him, that figure undoubtedly belonged to the strongest dragon king.

"O Tyrannos of the Bow! I have accepted your invitation and gone out of my way to come here!"

In front of the flying Hannibal was the golden ring hovering in midair.

He opened his mouth wide and breathed out fire despite his human form. His target was the ring—The Rune of the Ring that was preventing Hal and the Crimson Queen from taking action.

Scorched by fire, the golden ring began to melt—Then finally, it disappeared.

Naturally, the weird noise of 'nyyyaaaarrrllaaaaaathooooooooottt.....' also ceased.

In the next instant, Hal was able to move freely. He stood up all at once.

"Shirasaka!"

"...Senpai!"

Hearing Hal's call, Hazumi looked back, of course, She immediately rushed to him.

Also, as soon as she arrived in front of the liberated Hal, she swiftly turned around with her back towards him.

"Senpai, please! Do what you did last time!"

"Huh? But Shirasaka, I don't think you can still use pseudo-divinity—"

It was mid-sentence when Hal noticed.

Until now, Hazumi had always been a Level 2 witch. But now, the plentiful magical power inside her had already surpassed quantities dictated by that level.

During her awakening just now, did her level as a witch advance as well?

She had probably reached Level 3. However, Hal was still hesitant despite discovering this. This posture meant that Hazumi was requesting for him to use "that method."

However, Hazumi said firmly, "If it is Senpai... If it is you, Haruomi-senpai, I am fine with it. Please use Minadzuki and my power to avenge Shamiram-san—Please!"

"Shirasaka!"

Seeing Hazumi so brave, Hal dispelled his indecision completely.

He reached out with his right hand and grasped Hazumi's breast tightly with his palm where the Rune of the Bow had appeared. Although she was still growing up, for a fourteen-year-old, this volume was more than enough—Hal felt the softness in his palm beyond a doubt.

In fact, seeing Hazumi show such rare initiative, Hal silently felt moved in his heart.

The massive amount of magical power produced in Hal's heart was completely transmitted into the girl's body without any loss.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!"

He heard Hazumi's voice of pain.

In addition, his young protege used the same voice to force out a request to her partner.

"Nnnn... Minadzuki, please—Use Hinokagutsuchi-san's bow to shoot that black dragon!"

Ra—ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Minadzuki roared loudly. The emerald serpentine dragon leviathan was holding a crystal ball in her right forelimb. From there, a gigantic bolt of white lightning shot out.

This was the technique of assured annihilation, the sun-shooting divine bow.

Unable to resist, the False Black Queen was gradually erased by the light of the deadly lightning.

Only an ambiguous black shadow remained. Realizing that was precisely King Solomon's soul, Hal commanded at the same time.

"Queen!"

The Crimson Queen flew towards the black shadow.

She was wielding a long sword in her right and a kodachi in her left, manifestations of the Rune of the Twin Katana. Slashing from left and right, the queen seemed to slice through the black shadow in a cross shape—

'...Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!'

King Solomon's screaming resounded all around. However—

Although the twin blades' power caused the black shadow to shrink all at once, it did not disappear because the queen had held back. This was so that

Hal inflict upon King Solomon a move of retribution that had just occurred to him.

"Runes of Ruruk Soun!"

Responding to Hal's call, five magic symbols appeared around the black shadow.

They signified "absolute obedience." A curse of coercion. In the past, King Solomon had cast this magic on his lover and priestess—Shamiram.

After casting this spell, the Crimson Queen devoured the black shadow—Solomon's ghost.

She opened her mouth, took a bite and swallowed.

"I'm sorry... but you'll have to live under my control, just like what Shamiram-san had to endure," Hal spoke quietly.

However, Solomon did not respond. King Solomon's soul was barely alive after being struck by the twin blades, virtually devoid of strength or ability to think.

Precisely because of that, "absolute obedience" was able to take effect even though it was normally ineffective against enemies of the same level.

King Solomon and his rune had now become Hal's possessions.

The seventy-two serpent souls circling in the air far above floated down one after another and were absorbed into the red queen.

In that very instant, Hal came to inherit the great king's legacy completely.

In addition, the "seize control" spell he had used to take possession of Solomon's ark also reached completion at this time, achieving 100% control.

Now that the time was right, Hal ordered the ark to return immediately to the earth.

Part 6

Overhead, countless stars were hanging in the night sky.

Rather than inside the bizarre bounded field filled with a large number of sky islands, this was the night sky as seen from the earth. Similarly belonging to the earth, a light breeze blew across, gently caressing Hal and company.

The season was summer. The location was on the vast ocean.

Hal and company were riding on a wooden ship, i.e. the control device of Solomon's ark, drifting on the sea.

He hoped that their location was somewhere in the Atlantic, or near the mouth of the Hudson River where he had fought Hannibal, because in that case, they would not be far from New York City.

"Hmm, compared to a nonsensical prison, this place is still better."

In human form, Hannibal muttered to himself.

He was probably using magic. Hannibal was relaxing in the sky, using the air as his bed and mattress, reclining slothfully.

His posture was both elegant and childish.

Ignoring the lazy dragon king, Hal and Hazumi stood on the wooden ship's deck.

The two of them were facing the beautiful witch from the ancient kingdom. Shamiram's beautiful face and body were intact. Presumably, Ashkelon had cast healing magic on her.

After having made herself "presentable" flawlessly, she smiled at Hal.

"Well then, Lord Haruga... It is time that I ask you to do what you promised."

At her request, Hal pointed his right palm at Shamiram.

Appearing on the center of his palm, the Rune of the Twin Katana severed King Solomon's curse that was binding Shamiram, one of the living dead, to this world.

Next, Shamiram showed a gentle smile before vanishing instantly.

Without any touching scene, this was how they parted ways with the ancient witch. However, this type of decisive farewell was probably what she preferred, instead of setting off on her journey in sorrow.

Hal exhaled and said, "With that... This commotion has finally come to an end, I guess?"

"Looks... like it."

Hal and Hazumi spoke softly, smiling as they gazed at each other.

The two of them had surmounted many trials and tribulations to finally return to the earth. In terms of time, this journey had probably taken only two days, but in the process, the two of them seemed to have grown closer.

Hence, they were gazing at each other, smiling.

At the same time, Hinokagutsuchi materialized without warning.

"Hey brat."

The former dragon king spoke to Hal, who was filling his lungs with air from the earth's surface.

"I must apologize for this sudden question, but you ought to have remembered by now, have you not?"

"Remember what?"

"Eleven years ago, what you ate together with that girl named Asya on your first encounter."

"Now that's a really sudden question."

Hal sighed and replied, "I remember we were lost in Luxembourg and Asya used all her remaining cash to buy a hamburger. Then she shared half with me... No wait. I'm pretty sure Asya ate more than me. What about it?"

"Nothing. It is good that your memory is sound."

Even when confronted with a sudden question, Hal was able to reply fluently.

The adorable junior was watching from the side. Hal was relieved to have preserved his dignity as the senior. Incidentally, Hazumi was staring at Hal with widened eyes. *There's no need to be so surprised, is there?* He thought.

Hal was finally able to release that heavy weight in his heart.

Despite encountering a mountain of problems, he had managed to take care of them all. Next, all he needed to do was return to his friends at New York—

He began to think. First of all, he must confirm the current location.

Chapter 4 - Then Back to Tokyo

Part 1

It was the night of August 18th when they had returned to the surface world.

Shirasaka Hazumi and Haruomi-senpai were riding the wooden ship—the control device of King Solomon's legacy, the ark—and had gone back to somewhere unknown on the ocean.

After that, Haruomi-senpai immediately used Spatial Perception and Location Information magic.

"Off the coast of Long Island... The nearest port is Montauk? Roughly two hours by car... from Brooklyn. That's wonderful!"

Rather than drifting in the middle of the Atlantic, they were near a coast.

And very close to New York City too. In the end, they summoned the Crimson Queen and sat down in the center of her palm.

Then they had the queen fly to the nearest port.

They contacted SAURU's New York branch, went to a rental company that was still open, rented a car, and returned to Brooklyn after an absence of two days.

Back to one of New York's five boroughs, the district where SAURU's branch was located—

Hazumi barely managed to return with Senpai just before the calendar date changed again.

After a grand welcome from Orihime, Asya and SAURU staff, she returned to the hotel, finally alone in her own personal bedroom.

"Phew—"

Hazumi exhaled and entered the shower stall first.

Utterly exhausted, she actually felt like going to bed directly, but no matter what, she wanted to take a shower first.

While washing off dirt and fatigue accumulated over the past two days of adventuring, Hazumi murmured to herself, "I caused so much trouble for others again..."

Under the shower, she naturally thought of Haruomi-senpai.

For the past two days, she had been together with Senpai the whole time, while trapped in sleep magic as well, hence it might even feel longer than two days.

Possibly due to that...

When she was alone such as now, she felt extremely lonely...

However, there were things to be happy about too. From the battle against Hannibal to the decisive victory against King Solomon, during this period, Hazumi had managed to be of help to Haruomi-senpai even on her own.

Naturally, it was because Minadzuki and Shamiram were helping her.

Even so, she still found a way to persevere to the very end. Hazumi felt glad from the bottom of her heart.

To be honest, this was more important to her than her leveling up as a witch.

"Oh, but—"

Hazumi suddenly remembered.

Prior to taking off on the Crimson Queen, Haruomi-senpai had stepped aside for a private conversation with Hannibal in his human form. It seemed like they were reaching some kind of agreement.

Then grinning cheerfully, the red dragon king bid them farewell and left the wooden ship.

When she asked Haruomi-senpai what he had said to Hannibal, all he replied was "I'll tell you once the discussion bears more fruit."

Hazumi thought, *if only I could become more trusted by Senpai so that he'll confide in her even before important secret talks of that sort—*

"No, that is what I must become!"

The vague wish in her heart turned into a goal, but unbelievably, the moment this notion surfaced in her mind, the sense of loneliness intensified.

Of course, when morning came around again, she would be able to see Haruomi-senpai immediately.

However, she wanted to see him now, even though they had only parted ways an hour ago.

"If I call his cellphone this late... Senpai will be disturbed, right...?"

Hazumi spoke softly, suppressing her sad feelings.

Due to staying under the shower this whole time, her entire body had warmed up. However, she felt as though her body temperature had fallen to the pits. Why?

Just as Hazumi was feeling puzzled and confounded —

"You there."

"Y-Yes!?"

Someone was suddenly speaking to her from outside the shower stall.

A voice filled with a queen's pride. It was evidently Hinokagutsuchi.

Unnoticed, the elusive former dragon king had come to Hazumi's room.

"Hazumi, I wish to chat with you."

"R-Right now?"

"Yes. It concerns your 'Senpai.' Be quick."

"Senpai..."

"Kukukuku. Have you not noticed? Peculiarities about the brat."

"! I-I'll be right out!"

Hazumi immediately responded to the queen's grinning whispers.

She shut off the faucet and hastily went for the bathroom door.

"The closer one approaches transforming into a dragon, the more one's awareness and memories as a human will fade."

Inside the hotel room, a girl in a kimono was sitting on the bed.

It was the former dragon king, Hinokagutsuchi, who had apparently been human in the past. Despite the serious subject, she looked rather jovial even though one would not peg her as noble-minded in the first place.

"The brat has definitely set his eyes on the right spot. However, he is still too inexperienced..."

Hinokagutsuchi laughed mysteriously, "fufufu."

In contrast, Hazumi the listener did not share her mood at all. She could not even smile and her expression was so stiff that she could feel it herself.

This concerned Haruomi-senpai's future.

Incidentally, she had exited the bathroom after drying herself hastily with a towel, so her hair was still wet.

Hazumi did not even waste time on putting on clothes, simply wrapping herself in a bath towel. While admiring Hazumi's appearance with satisfaction (for some reason, she was pleased to see the naked skin of females despite being of the same gender), Hinokagutsuchi took her time to speak, touching upon the core issue.

"These are things that one might forget unwittingly—Do you not agree?"

"!?"

Hazumi reeled back in surprise, That was precisely what had bothered her. Seeing her reaction, Hinokagutsuchi nodded and continued explaining with a smile.

"As with all things, it was worth testing out, so I asked the brat about his past with that Asya girl. I seem to have heard the story before somewhere."

"Probably... that time when I asked Senpai," Hazumi lowered her head and said, "I asked Senpai how he met Asya-san."

For the past few months, Hazumi had more opportunities to travel with Haruomi-senpai by car.

She remembered clearly that she had asked this question when chatting during a leisurely drive.

As a ghost, Hinokagutsuchi frequently went invisible, hanging around Senpai like a guardian angel. Hence, she probably had some recollection.

However —

Haruomi-senpai's initial answer was subtly different from the one he had given inside the ark.

'...I remember it was eleven years ago when we were five. The two of us... were lost in a certain European country, so we bought either a burger or a hotdog to share. Back then, it was either Asya or me who paid, I guess?'

The overall response was similar but he was vague on the specific details.

"It has been almost half a year since the brat became a Tyrannos. During this time, he has acquired plenty of power, causing him to gradually turn into a dragon in body and soul."

"That's why Senpai is slowly losing his memories..."

At this rate, Haruomi-senpai would forget one day. Forget everyone. Forget he was ever part of the human world. Also, forget Shirasaka Hazumi —

Hazumi felt darkness dominate the future before her eyes.

However, she immediately changed her mindset, because she remembered what had happened after they returned to the earth.

"P-Please hold on! However, Hinokagutsuchi-san, you asked the same question twice, didn't you? The second time, Senpai definitely recalled his memory with Asya-san!"

Haruga Haruomi's second response was the following:

'I remember we were lost in Luxembourg and Asya used all her remaining cash to buy a hamburger. Then she shared half with me... No wait. I'm pretty sure Asya ate more than me.'

Hazumi argued emotionally and Hinokagutsuchi nodded.

"In fact, I intentionally asked a second time expecting this to happen, because the brat is a pervert."

"Huh?"

Hearing the unexpected answer, Hazumi was taken aback.

"A pervert... I remember it means 'a guy with dirty thoughts,' isn't that right?"

"Indeed. Even someone like you would know that much."

"Y-Yes. I know. Speaking of which, Senpai sometimes calls himself a 'closet pervert.'"

Hazumi recalled what Haruomi-senpai had said when praising her swimsuit look last time.

But why? The sense of joy and bliss from the memory of Haruomi-senpai praising her was more than anything could compare.

She even thought "if it would make Senpai happy, I don't mind wearing a swimsuit again—"

But why did the fact that Senpai was a "pervert" mean that his memories could recover?

"Obtaining combat power and the wisdom of the unorthodoxy would lead Tyrannoi and hybrids to become more like dragons... Conversely, the opposite situation can happen too. Pleasures that could only be enjoyed as a

human would occasionally cause someone farther along the path of becoming a dragon to revert back to human appearance."

"Pleasures...?"

"Did you know? Pure-blooded dragons are very different from you humans. Not only in body but also mind and soul. This is dragonkind's inborn nature. It is commonplace for hybrids to be devoured by the natural tendencies of dragons, losing themselves and descending into madness."

"....."

"Perhaps because of that, hybrids who have climbed up to the lofty position of dragon kings, such as Hannibal and that little girl Yukikaze, often retain desires and hobbies from their time as humans, staying the same even after becoming the strongest dragons. One might presume that they preserved their serenity of mind and soul through such a manner."

Indeed. Hazumi nodded silently.

The dragon kings mentioned by Hinokagutsuchi all had personalities that were the furthest from "asceticism." Right in front of her, Hinokagutsuchi was also the type to indulge her desires aplenty.

Meaning that—Hazumi instantly understood.

"I understand! As a closet pervert, Senpai would feel pleasure from engaging in perverted activities and revert slightly towards human... And his past memories returned too!"

"Yes. You comprehend very quickly."

"Oh, but what happened between the first and second times you asked that was perverted? I can't think of anything..."

"Silly girl. Did the brat not grope you in the chest?"

"Ehhh, but!"

Hazumi was shocked by Hinokagutsuchi's bluntness. However, she immediately refuted, "That was a means for sending magical power into my heart, which is why I feel... Senpai didn't do it with those kinds of feelings. Senpai seemed very serious at the time."

"Hmph. There is nothing more ridiculous than that."

Hinokagutsuchi asserted with a know-it-all look.

"The brat simply created a touching atmosphere to prevent you from discovering his lustful thoughts. He must have enjoyed it greatly."

"So that is what happened!?"

Having had all kinds of questions resolved, Hazumi instantly felt her mood brighten up.

Catering to the joys of the incomparably closeted Senpai would help him to return to being human.

"I will try my hardest!"

"Oh?"

"U-Umm, but if Senpai is happy... with touching even my kind of chest, I hope he will do it more. So..."

To enable Haruomi-senpai to feel pleasure, she would work hard.

However, Hinokagutsuchi shrugged sardonically in front of the determined Hazumi.

"If only things were that simple."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

"Human desires grow progressively. A man who is initially satisfied by breasts would gradually grow tired of them if that was all he received. One day, he would also—"

"Oh no..."

Hazumi was instantly dismayed. Then she thought of something.

Back when Hinokagutsuchi said that things would work out as long as they could offer Haruomi-senpai temptation.

Like having Orihime request to share a night of passion with him, for example. And have Luna Francois do the same supposing that was not enough. If even that was not enough, Hazumi herself too—

Could it be that this was truly necessary?

Hazumi felt uneasy as soon as she pictured Haruomi-senpai "strengthening his friendship" with Orihime-neesama and Luna-san. Pangs of pain surged up in her heart.

However, if all this was for Senpai's wellbeing, she would feel more glad.

The moment she thought that, the pain lessened slightly.

"I-I will do my best. If necessary, I'll ask Nee-sama and Luna-san to help, we will leave no stone unturned in trying to help Senpai!"

"Oh?"

Hearing Hazumi's declaration, Hinokagutsuchi narrowed her eyes.

"Your attitude is commendable. Well, give it your best attempt."

"Yes!"

"However, you are such a peculiar girl. I absolutely cannot fathom what is good about that brat with his personality twisted to such an extent."

The former dragon king shook her head. Hazumi could not help but answer, "N-Not at all, Senpai is very cool."

This rebuttal had escaped from her lips before she could think. She subconsciously wanted to defend Haruomi-senpai. Staring intently at Hazumi, Hinokagutsuchi tossed out a remark.

"Do you need your eyes checked?"

"If it's visual acuity, both of my eyes tested 1.5."

"That brat acts sloppily and shows no enthusiasm for things outside his interests. Apart from that, he is an insolent fellow who is extremely arrogant and often rambles on and on with twisted logic. Not cute in the slightest."

"I-I think those traits are what makes Senpai very cute."

"Neither brave nor gallant, nor stylish, nor handsome. Very poor at getting along with others."

"In spite of that, Senpai is still a wonderful person!"

"...Really?"

"...S-Sorry."

This was Hazumi's first time rebuking another person's opinion.

How unbelievable. She did not want to back down. She did not want to lie about anything regarding Haruomi-senpai—These thoughts surfaced in Hazumi's mind.

Finally, Hinokagutsuchi spoke in a rare and poignant tone of voice, "It is very admirable that you love him to such an extent."

"Huh?"

"You love the brat as a member of the opposite sex, do you not?"

"N-No... I have no intention of—Huh? B-But, so I actually, Ehhhhhh!?"

The true name for the feelings she felt for Haruomi-senpai.

This was the instant when Hazumi first became aware. All along, her feelings had clearly been vague, but now they finally took on distinct form.

The following was merely speculation.

Supposing Haruga Haruomi were present—

He would surely protest vehemently against Hinokagutsuchi, the self-styled devil, "What are you doing, planting such nonsensical ideas into Shirasaka's head?"

On the the other hand, the former queen of dragonkind would reply haughtily, "Given your unruly and arrogant ways, how could I ever pass up the chance to see you all panicked and flustered... Naturally, I felt compelled to speak out. Fret not, this would turn out to be quite an excellent experience from your perspective."

Regardless, Haruga Haruomi's destiny was to undergo even more momentous changes.

Part 2

Knock knock.

There was gentle knocking outside the door.

"Who could it be? It's so late already..."

Inside the hotel room, Hal grumbled before making his way to the door, thinking "could it be her?" while the subject's face surfaced in his mind.

—Several hours earlier, Hal had finally reached Brooklyn.

He met up with Asya, Orihime and the SAURU staff all of whom he had not seen for two days, reported what happened, and made arrangements to retrieve the wooden ship at Montauk.

After taking care of many matters, Hal finally had time to himself.

Just as he was about to get changed and go to bed, a visitor arrived.

It was already past midnight. Visiting at such an hour would be too counter to common sense. However, Hal joyfully went to open the door. Click.

As soon as he opened it, he found the expected person waiting for him.

"Haruga-kun...!"

"Juujouji!"

Juujouji Orihime rushed into the room.

She immediately closed the door, looking like she had sneaked over.

In fact, there was an unwritten rule between the two of them: they must keep their relationship a secret from the rest of the group. During the gathering earlier, Orihime had smiled the whole time, feeling happy for Hal's return.

However, she had suddenly winked to Hal.

'Later... Could I visit you?'

Feeling that Orihime was asking him that, Hal had nodded silently.

Then now, Orihime had sneaked over to his room. The smile on her face had vanished. Looking almost like she was about to cry, she threw herself at Hal.

"Honestly—I was so worried!"

Orihime's words conveyed all kinds of thoughts and feelings.

She had pounced as soon as she stepped into room, presumably unable to wait any longer. The instant Hal caught Orihime in his arms—

"Kyah!"

"Woah!?"

Definitely not a muscular guy, Haruga Haruomi stumbled, unable to withstand her weight.

Orihime ended up knocking him over, sending both of them to the ground.

"I am so sorry..."

"I'm the one who should apologize. Sorry, I haven't worked out enough..."

"No, I believe that your physique is very normal, Haruga-kun. I-I am the one at fault, because I weigh more than the average girl..."

"You're definitely quite substantial in various places..." Hal remarked without thinking.

At this very moment, the weight of her limbs and her entire body was on top of Hal.

The two of them were pressed intimately together. Naturally, he was able to fully savor Orihime's softness, fragrance, and more importantly, the wonderful sensation from her breasts that were sufficient to call gigantic.

They took away Hal's self-control, causing him to accidentally speak his mind with a sigh.

However, Hal immediately realized he had misspoken.

Because Orihime swiftly looked up while maintaining her posture weighing against him.

"Haruga-kun — A-Am, am I really very heavy...?"

"Th-That's not what I meant!"

Hal hastily explained to the adolescent girl who seemed quite distressed by the comment.

"What I meant by substantial is your figure. Just your figure, nothing else. Also, the force was so big just now only because you pounced on me. Relax, Juujouji, your weight definitely doesn't exceed the average for your age. I guarantee it."

That being said, Hal actually had no idea what the average weight was for a sixteen-year-old Japanese girl.

Trying his best to put on a serious face, he made it up on the spot.

No helping it. He could not think of any other solution except for a "white lie." Fortunately, Orihime was willing to listen to Hal's reasoning.

"R-Really...?"

"Of course. When have I ever lied to you?"

"Maybe three or four times..."

"Uh, well—"

Hearing Orihime's serious response, Hal scratched his head. Orihime continued, "But... whatever. I'll believe you this time. You are right, it was your fault just now, Haruga-kun, for not working out properly when you're clearly a boy!"

"That's right, Juujouji!"

After reaching consensus, the two of them looked at each other and smiled.

Then they noticed. Hal was sitting on the ground with Orihime resting her weight on top of him. All this time, they were pressed together tightly.

Their faces were also very close together. Extremely close.

If they brought their faces together slightly, they would be kissing.

"....."

"....."

Staring at each other, they remained silent.

Not only Hal but Orihime as well knew that they could do "it" right now.

She looked away shyly, trying to avoid making eye contact with Hal as much as possible, which was why Hal could tell from a glance.

Also, Orihime's face had turned red faintly, she was sitting uncomfortably, looking very embarrassed.

Hal was not much better. Even after realizing the two of them could kiss, he remained hesitant, delaying at length.

However.

Their faces gradually drew close together. Finally, their gazes met.

Hal recalled what he had said to Hazumi inside the ark: "It's best to leave our relationships at the stage of 'more than friends but less than lovers.'"

"I... might end up turning into a dragon."

"I know."

Hal muttered and Orihime nodded.

Even so, they continued to slowly shrink the distance between them.

"That does not matter. Haruga-kun, even if you are going to turn out that way, I still wish to convey my feelings, more or less, to you before that happens... I wish to experience your feelings too, Haruga-kun."

"Juujuuji—"

"I love you. I really love you. I love you so much," Orihime smiled and said to Hal.

In the next instant, their lips came together tightly. It happened so naturally that no one could tell who kissed first.

—*But I might even forget you too.*

Hal thought silently to himself. He clearly felt that this was something he ought to tell Orihime, but could not bring himself to speak. He was unable to suppress the thought, *what if their relationship changed as a result of this?*

He was able to act with full professionalism in the context of work, but could only behave this way when confronted by women.

Just as Hal realized his powerlessness, Orihime timidly inserted her tongue into Hal's mouth. Her motions were stiff and clumsy.

At that moment, all hesitation was blown away.

"Juujouji...!"

"Haruga-kun...!"

Hal embraced her tightly, sucking her tongue forcefully.

Using his lips to seal Orihime's soft mouth, he reached out with his tongue and licked, causing their tongues to entangle with each other, impatiently savoring the sensation of Juujouji Orihime's interior.

Orihime responded with all her might.

Using tongue to respond to tongue, she reacted to Hal's kiss with equal passion.

Yet at the same time, she accepted Hal's awkward forcefulness with maidenly delicacy.

In the end, their kiss lasted five or six minutes. Engaging in mutual stimulation using their lips and tongues, they vented their heightened emotions on each other.

Finally, the two of them separated their lips at the same time to catch their breath.

"Haruga-kun... Let us have a good chat tonight, alright?"

"O-Of course it's alright. We can chat all night long if you want."



Hal gave an instant reply to Orihime's gentle whispers.

However, the inappropriate words of "I don't want to leave tonight" surfaced in his mind. Orihime suddenly looked intently at Hal's face and asserted, "The seriousness of your facial expression seems very deliberate... You are having dirty thoughts again, aren't you?"

"!? Not at all!"

"Seriously... Haruga-kun, do know that I am well aware of your thoughts and habits."

"Hahahahaha..."

"I-I believe that sort of behavior is still too soon for us. Of course... After a bit more time... Who knows what developments might hold in the future..."

Despite clearly refusing him, she seemed inexplicably sexy.

Orihime's attitude of shyness combined with a willingness to accept him was very seductive, causing Hal's heart to skip a beat. He began to feel dizzy.

At that moment, the cellphone in Hal's pants pocket vibrated.

Someone had texted him.

Hal took out his phone and looked at the screen, only to see a single sentence of "I've arrived☆"

"What does that mean?" Orihime tilted her head in puzzlement.

They were leaning very close together, which was why Orihime could read the text too.

In the next instant, they heard knocking at the door. Someone had apparently arrived at their door!

Hal and Orihime exchanged nods and pulled away from each other.

They stood up at the same time. Then Hal opened the hotel room door slightly — And was shocked.

"It's been a while, Harry. After receiving word that you are safe, I flew over♪"

Standing outside was Luna Francois Gregory.

She was wearing a shoulder-less black nightdress, which accentuated her seductive figure that one might describe as perfection. In addition, the low-cut knitted cardigan was see-through purple with a definitely adult flavor.

Hal invited Luna Francois into the room and moved to the sofa.

SAURU had arranged quite an excellent room for him, though it was unknown whether they were offering Hal luxury treatment now that he had leaped into the ranks of the VIPs. Apart from the bed, sofa, table, etc, the room was fully furnished, even providing a desk for computer use.

Business hotels in Japan would be too cramped to accommodate such furnishings.

Thanks to that, Hal could sit leisurely on one of the sofas with Orihime seated on the other end.

This left Luna, who selected an unexpected spot as her seat.

"Umm, my lap is not a chair, okay..."

"Who cares? We were separated on different continents for so long, I missed you so much, Harry."

Luna Francois was sitting sideways on Haruga Haruomi's lap.

She was even leaning against Hal's torso, rubbing her beautiful face and blonde hair against Hal's face.

This action caused Luna's prided body, superior to Orihime's in stats, as well as its outrageous voluptuousness, to rest its entire weight against Hal's upper body, attacking him with an indescribable feeling of satisfaction.

However, Hal definitely must not get carried away.

Orihime was right in front of him, staring sorrowfully at Luna and Hal's indecent appearance.

"It's only been half a month or so since we left Japan, you know?"

Form is no different from emptiness, etc, okay. Hal desperately focused his mind and replied stiffly.

However, Luna spoke in a voice as sweet as honey, whispering in Hal's ear.

"For a girl in love, this duration would be equivalent to eternity. Harry, you must know that I am so infatuated with you. I don't wish to separate from you ever again♪"

Luna was not simply expressing her love in a joking manner.

Making full use of her natural initiative, she kissed Hal on the earlobe. Then the cheek. Then she rubbed her face against Hal's to enjoy skin contact— Then suddenly.

In the blink of an eye, Luna kissed Hal.

"Mmmmmmmmmph!?"

"Welcome back, Harry. I seriously regretted it when I heard that you and Hazumi-san had gone missing. Sure enough, I should have come along to New York too," she said in rapture while pecking Hal lightly on the lips.

Luna's tongue slowly entered Hal's mouth and even hooked and pulled Hal's own tongue. Pressing forward with her tongue to lick and savor, it was like two snakes intertwined with each other.

The deep kiss that came without warning made Hal jump in fright, putting him in a submissive position.

When Luna parted her lips slightly to breathe, Hal wanted to tell her "Oh, uh, that's enough, okay..."

However, his mouth was instantly sealed again.

In the next second, Orihime reached the end of her patience and yelled, "L-Luna-san! This is too sudden no matter how much you love Haruga-kun! He wanted to tell you to stop just now, didn't he!?"

"Fufufufu. Sorry, I couldn't help myself. By the way —"

Luna suddenly examined Hal's lips with a serious expression.

"Do you actually suffer from dry lips, Harry? It doesn't seem so to me."

Hal was just about to say "I don't" when he realized something.

He had been kissing Orihime just now.

During the kiss with Orihime, he had enjoyed the smooth texture of her lips and a faint minty fragrance. Most likely, the Japanese girl had used lip gloss.

Thinking "don't tell me that—", Hal instantly replied, "Oh right. I do have dry lips, which is why I applied lip gloss just now."

"Oh? ...I didn't expect you to pay attention to such things too, Harry."

Could it be that Orihime's lip gloss had transferred to his lips during their kiss?

Then the witch dressed in black had astutely deduced "something had happened"?

To resolve this crisis, Hal made up a reason. However, Luna Francois still showed slight doubt in her eyes.

Hal did his best to put on a natural smile.

"Hahahahaha. W-Well, I do pay attention once in a while."

"That reminds me! I wanted to ask you about something, Luna-san!"

Orihime extended a helping hand. She had noticed that Luna was suspecting something too.

"Luna-san, didn't you stay behind in order to protect Tokyo New Town? Now that you rushed all the way here to America... Will there be a problem?"

"Oh right, I wanted to ask about that too."

At least one witch had to stay in Tokyo New Town to defend it from the threat of dragonkind.

That was why Hal had not allowed Luna to accompany him on this trip. At least that was the way things were supposed to be. However, the American girl smiled tenderly.

"Don't worry about that. While you were away, I found helpers."

"What helpers?"

"I called over a bunch of witches I became acquainted with in Europe before... and they owed me many favors. I asked them to hold the fort in my absence, so don't worry a thing."

"Ehhh!?"

There existed free agent witches like Asya who did not belong to any organization exclusively.

However, they were all spirited women, extremely rare and highly skilled. Naturally, they were in very high demand too.

To suddenly call upon such personnel, asking them to come to Japan, the price must have been quite high. However, Luna Francois acted carefree while reporting this and even added, "Hence, Harry, I am completely free during this trip. I intend to go shopping tomorrow, so please keep me company♪"

Hearing this matter-of-fact demand, Hal nodded reflexively.

Part 3

"So the conclusion is that you are going out with Luna?"

"Yeah, I've got to keep her company for tonight. But we're not alone. Juujouji is with us too."

Hal gave a ready response to the exasperated Asya.

They were having breakfast. It was the next morning after the ark's return. Hal had found a text message on his phone when he woke up. It was an invitation from his childhood friend to have breakfast together.

"Say, why couldn't we have eaten breakfast at the hotel?"

"It's not a bad idea once in a while. I've wanted to eat at this kind of place on occasion."

Breakfast was provided at the hotel they were staying at.

But that morning, at Asya's suggestion, they had gone to a food truck, the kind commonly found in North America, and casually ordered their choice of food.

It suddenly struck Hal that had Luna been the one to suggest this—

Most likely, he would have suspected Luna of taking him somewhere away from the other girls to spend time alone. Thinking that, Hal smiled wryly.

Presumably, his childhood friend with the hearty appetite simply missed the taste of more pedestrian fare.

Also, Hal had ordered toast, a fried egg sunny side up and crispy bacon. Asya's breakfast consisted of a bagel with an omelet topped with cream and a hash brown on the side, quite a small breakfast.

"Are you still on a diet?"

"Please don't use such a weird description. I've simply decreased my food intake. This is the standard amount for my physique."

"Well, I guess that's right."

Hal was still concerned but Asya ate her breakfast as though nothing had happened.

However, their gazes suddenly met a number of times. Every time he made eye contact with Asya, Hal felt his heart pounding.

He had already known this childhood friend for countless years, yet now, from her clear blue eyes... Hal found her gaze indescribably alluring.

Speaking of which, a few days ago, she had ____ him.

Hal did everything he could to avoid thinking back to that, but unbelievably, Asya also did not mention it at all. Currently, both of them were "pretending to have forgotten" what had happened.

(What nonsense am I thinking about Asya now?)

Feeling angry at his own ineptitude(?), Hal was very agitated.

"By the way..."

The childhood friend happened to speak up, startling Hal.

"W-What is it?"

"You agreed to go out with Luna in the evening, which means you're free during the day, right? Can you accompany me to Montauk later? I'd like to have a look at the ark's control device for future reference."

"Oh, sorry, I've got something for the morning too."

This was the truth, so Hal replied quite fluently.

"It's Chris and the WotC from the New York National Guard. They wanted to throw us a party to celebrate Shirasaka and my return."

"Then what about the afternoon?"

"I've also got another appointment I can't cancel, so let's pick another day. Since we have to go eventually, why not have Juujouji, Shirasaka and Luna, of course, join in for the ride too?"

"I can't believe that Haruomi declined an invitation from a girl so readily!?"

After breakfast, left alone, Asya randomly entered a park.

She was sitting on a bench, connected to the internet through a tablet, having a video chat with someone back in Japan at Tokyo New Town. Naturally, she was grumbling to President M.

"To think I specifically brought him out of the hotel, made him overly conscious of the beautiful maiden that is me and even invited him out for a date, my combo skill was so perfect..."

'That Haruga guy used other girls to decline your invitation huh...'

President M mused poignantly.

'Meaning that he has progressed significantly?'

"Progressed!?"

'Under the accumulation of coincidental and inevitable circumstances, Haruga have had more opportunities to be surrounded by women. Added to that are the bold approaches from American girls, increasing his personal combat experience—Hence, he must have learned to some extent the evasive techniques used by popular men.'

"Ughhhhhh! What is that Haruomi getting carried away for!?"

After complaining, Asya calmed down. Unlike before, after her metamorphosis, Anastasya Rubashvili was a calm hunter of love.

"In other words, it might be time for me to fire the second arrow to continue my makeover."

'Do you have some kind of idea?'

"The biggest obstacle to making progress in my relationship with Haruomi is the fact 'we grew up together like siblings.' It's the whole reason why Haruomi thinks of me as family and strongly resists seeing me as a member of the opposite sex..."

Previously unable to understand her childhood friend's heart, Asya had him all figured out now.

"Although things are not quite the same as when we last talked, I wonder if there's a way to make Haruomi lose his memory? Like pushing him down a cliff into the ocean or something. To reset his memory and build a new relationship!"

'Well, as long as he doesn't end up rolling down the jagged cliff, it's worth a shot, isn't it?'

What a sloppy answer.

'Using handy magic of that sort would be another method.'

"I'm this stuck precisely because there isn't any magic of that sort. Can't this be dealt with using one of your shady skills with a quick 'zap!'... President?"

'No such skill exists. It's not like I am an alien with beams shooting out of my eyes.'

"Really? President, I always get the feeling that your true identity might unexpectedly turn out to be something like a New-Type with awakened abilities due to the human species evolving after the arrival of dragonkind."

'Enough with such nonsense. It is time for you to return to Tokyo.'

"Huh?"

Asya jumped in surprise, because President M suddenly turned serious.

'I have been feeling uneasy the whole time recently. There is a very strong premonition—Something huge will happen to the city in the near future and might need your party's power.'

Undoubtedly, this was a declaration from a psychic with shady powers of prescience.

President M's "warning" caused Asya's expression to tense up.

While the silver-haired master-class witch was contacting Japan...

Juujouji Orihime and Luna Francois Gregory were meeting in the hotel lounge, having a morning coffee together after breakfast.

At this moment, Shirasaka Hazumi arrived.

"Hazumi, did you sleep well last night?"

"I heard from Harry that you two went through tough times."

Hazumi greeted the two girls who were her senior then said, "Well, Nee-sama and Luna-san... I have a matter to discuss with you, actually. It's about Senpai—Haruomi-senpai's state of health."

Hearing Hazumi speaking in such a serious tone of voice, Orihime and Luna Francois were both stunned for a moment.

Unbeknownst to them at the time, the web of personal relationships centered around Haruga Haruomi was about to undergo a dramatic change triggered by this moment—

Part 4

The majority of the twenty-three wards of Tokyo in the past had become the dragon concession territory of "Old Tokyo."

Important modes of mass transportation such as the Yamate Line were now just part of a wasteland.

In Tokyo New Town, there was a new railway that could be called the New Yamate Line.

Namely, the Tokyo New Town Loop Line. The Yamate Line used to be a looping railway that circled the inside of the city. Similarly, the New Yamate Line also circled through Tokyo New Town along an elliptical track.

Kitasenju, Narihirabashi, Ryougoku, Shin-Kiba, Kasai Rinkai Park, Koiwa, Kameari, Ayase, etc...

These were the train stations along the route.

"Ho..."

By the time *he* realized, *he* had already chuckled out loud.

Recently, taking the New Yamate Line had become a guilty pleasure of his. By sitting in the train, he was able to get an expansive view of this *human* settlement of Tokyo. A city that was to become his possession in the near future.

The feeling of "power" that he was eventually going to wield —

It boiled his blood and excited his emotions, turning into his source of fighting spirit.

"I cannot wait. Soon, the opportunity shall arrive... It is not far off now, Princess Yukikaze, as well as my rival of fate, Haruga Haruomi," he muttered to himself.

There were people staring at him. Taking the train along the New Town Loop Line on his own, he was leaning against the door, looking out the window at the scenery.

Two nearby female humans on the same train kept sneaking glances at the side of his face.

Judging from their identical attire, he could tell that they were known as "female high school students."

In the past, he did not know why people stared at him, but now he did. These females were apparently attracted to him. What a pain.

His reflection on the train window was a handsome face. In addition to his extraordinary handsomeness, there was his tall stature exceeding 180cm and beautiful silver hair. All things considered, he stood out very much.

He was already very used to his human attire consisting of a white shirt paired with slacks.

With the top buttons unfastened, the neckline of his shirt offered glimpses of a silver chain.

This exceptionally conspicuous handsome young man was named Pavel Galad. A pure-blooded dragon and Tyrannos, successor to the Rune of the Sword.

In the middle of the clear blue sky...

"I'm so excited," said Princess Yukikaze softly.

Maintaining her human form, dressed in a white one-piece dress, she was standing over a thousand kilometers above the ground.

Previously called "Ginza," this wasteland had a towering gigantic triangular prism of pure black—a Monolith. Princess Yukikaze was standing alone at the pinnacle of the Monolith, feeling the howling wind blow past her.

However, mere wind of the earth could not possibly restrict the white dragon king's freedom no matter how forcefully it blew.

While casually enjoying the feeling of the raging wind blowing against her, she whispered, "Time to stop lurking... Haruomi, I wonder how are things on your end?"

This was the name of the successor to the dragonslaying rune of the Bow Star of the Southern Sky.

Paired with Princess Yukikaze who had inherited the Arrow of Sirius, the man of destiny might turn out to be him.

It was almost time to "play" with that sleepy-looking young man. Would it be tomorrow, the day after that, or a month later?

Princess Yukikaze grinned aggressively and sucked the air of the clear blue sky into her lungs.

No matter what, it was going to be the not too distant future. Such a premonition surfaced in the princess' heart.

Afterword

Hello everybody, it's been a while.

The sixth installment of this series could be considered a special side story, I guess. Briefly summarized, it's "let's have a great adventure in Demon King Solomon's dungeon!" This product was designed for chatting and showing off sweet moments with Hazumi-san whenever there were casual moments in the adventure.

(rustle rustle) Note: the sound of someone hiding in the shadows

In a way, this volume's main theme is "this month's special: Shirasaka Hazumi." Actually, it's a "Shirasaka Hazumi Fan Disc Project" with elements of "why not have a short story collection with Hazumi-san as the main heroine?" (laugh)

I came up with many different versions for the outline, but the previous volume ended at that kind of spot after all...

So in the end, it became this kind of story.

This volume was one spent on describing the main character's various characteristics along with Hazumi-san.

His insight and initiative are outstanding when confronted with his realms of expertise, but completely disinterested in the face of subjects outside his specialty. A personality of extremes. Starting next volume, he will be swept into a tumultuous(?) romantic comedy, so I planned on giving supplementary lessons to him and Hazumi-san, a pair who are inexperienced at dealing with this sort of stuff.

(stare stare) Note: onomatopoeia for poking one's face out to gesture with one's eyes

By the way, I don't put too much personal feeling into characters making their appearances, so I put all of them at roughly the same level while I watch from afar.

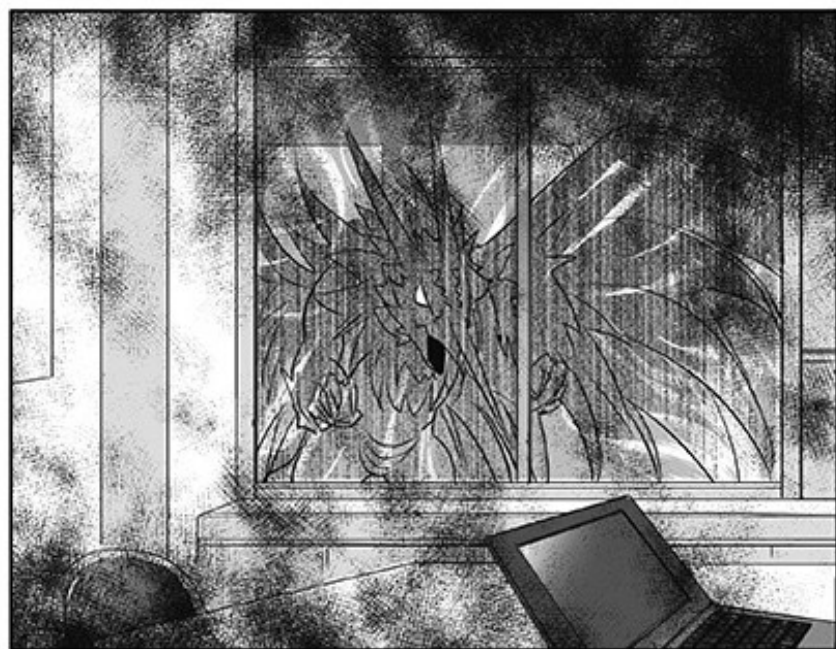
But I definitely wrote this volume with a desire to give preferential treatment to Hazumi-san. (laugh)

Given her personality, she's not going to get too much screentime normally, so a bit of favoritism should be fine occasionally. On this point, I suppose one could say it's a reward for her daily conduct.

Only limited to this volume, she literally became the main heroine...

(agitation, restlessness) Note: onomatopoeia for a bad mood for being ignored

I don't think any character in the story would complain about this level of favoritism, so just think of it as an occasional celebratory project... Oh my, however—



Technically, I think I can think of one character who might have complaints, but in a certain way, she gets special treatment in every volume's afterword.

Hence this time, I deliberately promoted Hazumi who's normally positioned third or fourth.

Oh, I'm not trying to explain myself to a certain someone.

(Hmph—!) Note: the sound of someone angrily snorting through their nostrils

...Darkness seems to be lurking restlessly outside the window.

If this was happening inside a creation myth of cosmic horrors, I think writing "The window! The window!" (Note 1) here would make it the final climax where one can't help but throw a punchline "Stop writing your diary or novel there so leisurely and start running!" Or would it be the final scene where I sing "Cthulhu fhtagn! Iä! Iä! Iä!" (Note 2) while setting off for the nostalgic ocean?

For readers who don't get the references, let me explain.

Note 1 is a story about a monster outside the window, an evil deity's minion.

Note 2 is a story about a reckless human wanting to uncover the secrets of a great deity hidden in the underwater ruins of R'lyeh. Turned half-fish by ominous black magic, he swims happily to return to the ocean.

I think I'd better escape as quickly as possible...

"Hold it right there!"

Ah. The window! The window!

"Ignoring me the whole time from the very start, what are you trying to pull!?"

...You've got me wrong, Asya-san. I was thinking perhaps I should stop using this style of "dialogue with a character in the story" afterword that dates back to the 1990s. You mentioned it before too.

"What!? What are you talking about? By this point, readers would be expecting this—or rather, they're expecting me to make an appearance!"

But I think everyone already predicted this kind of pattern.

After all, more than likely, Asya's gonna make a big fuss in the afterword again—Something like that. Wouldn't it be entertaining to give readers a surprise~?

"R-Responding to reader expectations is part of service, you know? And everyone is looking forward to someone barging into the afterwords of this series!"

As such, today I have invited another guest for our readers today.

"Huh?"

From Volume 2 of *Lady Knight*, let's go to JUSCO (女騎士さん、ジャスコ行こうよ) that's being released this same month, I've specially invited one of the heroines, Princess Po. Please come in.

"Ehhhhh!?"

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

JUSCO!

Hello everyone. My name is Princess Po.

I shan't take offense from anyone who is thinking "who the hell are you?" right now.

I permit you to swiftly make your way to the nearest bookstore to purchase the first two volumes of *Lady Knight*, let's go to JUSCO published by MF Bunko J.

Or rather, everyone, please buy these books.

Well, if one really had to explain to those who know absolutely nothing about this series, it is an epic story about a princess of the Magic Horizon, the beautiful maiden known as Polilifa the "Buttercup Princess"... i.e. myself, on a quest together with my trusted beautiful knight, Clauzela, towards the utopian realm of JUSCO located somewhere on Earth.

It is a wholesome adventure story unfolding across Gifu Prefecture on the boundary between land and sea with absolutely nothing to do with terms like "h-game", "rape", "tentacles", "ugh, kill me now!", "gufufufu, looks like making you depraved won't be that easy", "a run-of-the-mill pervert", "sadness on the level of a 'common rural story' would be too realistic, so it won't be used to promote urban development even if it ends up animated, right?", "super steady borefest", etc.

The 580 yen (tax not included) x 2 volumes from everyone will surely enable me to get closer to JUSCO.

Thanks!

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

...I've been wondering whether I should find someone like this as a partner for the afterword.

"W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-What are you thinking—!?"

I also have plans to borrow the school idol Water God-san (note: tentacles included) from next door, asking him to speak in human language for once.

"You've already got me, a beautiful maiden from this series, why on earth are you summoning characters from other series!?"

I happen to be writing the afterword in a conference room at Media Factory.

Then my old friend—a certain Mr. Itou Hiro, author of *JUSCO*—was there too, so I asked if I could borrow Princess Po for a moment and he agreed.

"Both the person who asked and the one who granted permission are crazy!"

Oh dear. Volume 6 has a kind of side story feel, so I wanted the afterword to be more fun too.

"Ughhhhhh. So that's why middle-aged guys who prioritize their own hobbies during work have no future..."

It's important to find a breather during hectic work. If you're too busy, making your nerves tense all the time, you could easily have a nervous breakdown.

"Please don't use well-known sayings to wrap up your malicious pranks! Oh, you've already used up quite a few pages on the afterword. Isn't it time to finish?"

Ehhh!

"Then I'll save this gag for next time..."

No helping it. Let's put it away for now.

"(Phew)."

Okay. Volume 6 focused on Shirasaka Hazumi and the plot also pushed forward.

Starting next volume, I expect the stage to finally return to Tokyo New Town with major battles and a climax in the plot.

A formidable foe from the past will rise up from past setbacks, working in secret to regain his honor.

Then the final boss and "true heroine" will return to the main story in peak form.

Illustrator Nimura-san also said "I want to draw Princess Yukikaze."

I guess I might as well trouble him to draw Princess Yukikaze on the cover again. As the author, since a long time ago, I've — Oh, what's the matter, Asya-san?

"Nothing. This is a rare chance to announce important news of great memorable value, but somehow I get the feeling that the focus has been cleverly obfuscated..."

Fufufufufufu.

"I can't believe you're getting in the way of my moment under the spotlight... (muttering)"

How should I say this. I definitely committed it firmly to memory. During the 2014 Summer Heroine Contest, Asya-san, you achieved the excellent result of fourth place overall.

"!?"

In fact, I have prepared a place for you to celebrate.

I've already booked a table at a certain restaurant and secretly called up the usual lineup... So tonight, please enjoy yourself.

"W-What is with this sudden change of heart of yours!?"

Nothing of particular significance. I do occasionally want to repay you, Asya-san, for leading this series. I did this purely out of goodwill and benevolence.

"This response seems so fake and suspicious..."

Stop being so distrustful. Isn't it time for you to get going?

If you refuse to participate, I'll just have to call everyone who are gathered over there to "forget Asya-san and just have fun on your own" —

"Oh, no. I intend to enjoy myself first and ignore this stuff for now. Naturally, you're paying for the meal, right?"

...Yeah, that's right.

"Very well. I'll be going then! Also, pick me for the cover of Volume 7! Since you've rotated through the heroines once, I think I should be on the next cover as the true main heroine!"

I'll consider it... But it might be nice to suddenly let certain supporting characters take the spotlight next time. Like Mutou-san or Funaki-san. The cover might turn out to be them unexpectedly...

"(Yelling while running) What did you just say!?"

Nothing. Nothing. Well then, take care, dear readers.